BETH ANNE REALLY —FOR— TRULY

MARY PEMBERTON GINTHER

A HAPPY PARTY

BETH ANNE
REALLY-FOR-TRULY

By
PEMBERTON GINTHER

AUTHOR OF
"BETH ANNE HERSELF"

Illustrated by THE AUTHOR

THE PENN PUBLISHING
COMPANY PHILADELPHIA
1916

COPYRIGHT
1916 BY
THE PENN
PUBLISHING
COMPANY

Beth Anne Really-for-Truly

I dedicate this second volume of Beth Anne to my small niece Elizabeth, with a great deal of love and the wish that it may please her as well as "Beth Anne Herself"

Introduction

"It's so dif'runt," said Jinny, the little street waif, when she was brought into Beth Anne's beautiful home and shown the delights of Christmas time among kind and tender hearts. And she felt it again when, dressed in one of Beth Anne's pretty dresses, she took part in the Christmas party that night. The difference grew less and less, however, as she came to know and love Beth Anne and her sweet mother and jolly generous father, and by the time that, as the charge of the warm-hearted Burtons, she left Beth Anne for the school at Brighton, she had become so much beloved that Beth Anne was moved to envy.

What came of that unhappy little feeling, and how Pietro brought understanding and gladness through a sharp grief, is told in "Beth Anne Herself," wherein is also related

Beth Anne's real discovery that the Grow Straight rule of "Others First" means genuine happiness.

The present book tells Beth Anne's various experiences during the absence of her parents in the West, where they have gone for three months' study of Indian life, and shows how the same rule works out at both ends, helping the one who tries to practice it as well as those for whom it is practiced.

Contents

I.	The Empty House	11
II.	Beth Anne's Great Idea	32
III.	Joseph and His Brethren	51
IV.	Cap'n Dan'l Arrives	73
V.	A Morning Call	92
VI.	Beth Anne Parades	104
VII.	The Arrivals at Stepping Stones	120
VIII.	Getting Acquainted	138
IX.	Plots and Plans	153
X.	The Testing of the Niminy-Piminies	163
XI.	A Cure for Stammering Tongues	185
XII.	Polly Phemie is Introduced	206
XIII.	The Dove of Peace	219
XIV.	Captain Dan'l's Apology	234
XV.	A Step in the Right Direction	248
XVI.	A Candidate for the Grow Straight Club	261
XVII.	Odds and Ends	275
XVIII.	The New Member	286
XIX.	No News is Good News	298
XX.	The Passing of the Niminy-Piminies	311
XXI.	The Picnic at Dark Hollow	317
XXII.	Egbert to the Rescue	331
XXIII.	The Wedding Party	343

Illustrations

	PAGE
The Official Table . . .	*Frontispiece*
"Let Me Introduce You, Ma'am" . .	86
"How Did You Ever Do It?" . . .	163
"My, But it Feels Good!" . . .	273
Every One was Soon Hard at Work . .	319

Beth Anne, Really-for-Truly

CHAPTER I

THE EMPTY HOUSE

"Oh, look, Beth Anne! There's a man going into the empty house!"

Jinny craned her neck and flattened her pretty nose against the window of the old play-room at Gable End, trying to get a better view between the bare branches of the big sycamore.

Beth Anne was at the battered desk, deep in her papers and lesson-books and she merely said, "Uh-huh" very absently and went on with her scribbling.

"But, Beth Anne," protested Jinny, poking out a reproachful toe to touch Beth Anne's sprawling tan-shod foot, "he's going into Doane's. Hurry up, or you'll miss him."

Beth Anne came out of her papers with a jump, her blue eyes sparkling with interest and her pink lips eager. She flew to the window to flatten her own puggy nose on the cool pane and to stare with all her might.

The white house down the road was too much hidden by the bare trees to be seen very clearly but Beth Anne managed to make out a man's figure on the front porch. Then she shook her curls and frowned.

"Pooh, it's only Mr. Sims!" she said in disappointment. "Those agents are always poking about to see that nobody burns the house down or runs off with it. Mary said this morning that nobody had looked at it since Marjorie and her mother left, and that's been ages and ages ago."

Jinny gave her an excited poke. "There, he's going out toward the summer-house. Now, is it Mr. Sims?"

Beth Anne squinted at the tall figure with its trim overcoat, shiny high hat and pale kid

gloves and cane, all seen quite distinctly now, and she gave in.

"No, it isn't Mr. Sims. I'd know his squibbly red whiskers a mile off. This one's awfully dressed up, isn't he? Maybe he's a sneak thief; they mostly wear high hats in the newspapers ——"

"Stuff!" said Jinny in disdain. "You know he wouldn't be walking about like that. He'd have a mask and come at night, or he'd rush up in an automobile and take away all the plumbing or something. Besides, there's Mr. Sims now," and she pointed to the figure coming in the gate. "See, he doesn't run away. There, they are going into the house. Isn't he tall, though! I wonder who he is."

"I've never seen him in my life," said Beth Anne with her eyes fairly snapping and her whole mind alert. "He doesn't live anywhere near this village. And I never saw him in town, either."

Jinny laughed. "There are lots of people

in town you've never seen, and you've been out in the country here for a whole year," she declared. "He may come from anywhere, for all you know."

"Nobody came with him, anyway," replied Beth Anne, thinking rapidly. "He must be all alone. Maybe he's a hermit and wants to get away from the world."

"With a cane and a high hat and lemony kid gloves?" laughed Jinny. "Hermits don't wear clothes like that, Beth Anne Burton, and you know it."

Beth Anne tossed her curly head. "Clothes don't matter at all to real hermits, Jinny dear," she said, trying to be patient with Jinny's slowness. "They just wear the sort they happen to like; and if a millionaire turned hermit in a hurry he'd most likely have on a high hat and lemony kid gloves. So you see, he may be a hermit after all."

Jinny was not much impressed with this notion, but she loved Beth Anne too well to hurt her feelings by laughing any more.

"Well, I hope he comes,—hermit or no hermit," she said peaceably. "It's six whole months since the Doanes left. All the leaves will be popping out pretty soon, and that lovely rose garden will be a perfect tangle of weeds if some one doesn't take care of it."

"Let's take a good look at him when they come out," suggested Beth Anne, hopefully. "Perhaps Mrs. Drake may know him if we tell her just what he looks like."

They watched and waited for what seemed a long time, but no one came out of the white house. Jinny stirred uneasily, and Beth Anne hopped from the window-seat and began tossing her books and papers into the old desk.

"I tell you what we'll do ——" she began, when the soft hum of the clock chimes floated musically up the front stairs.

"Phew, four o'clock!" she cried in dismay, snapping the lid of the desk with a click. "I promised to tell you as soon as you came in, and I started that tiger story and forgot all

about it. Come along and get dressed this very minute. We're to help with the cakes and things at Drakes', and we'll be late if we don't hop!"

Jinny pelted her with eager questions as they scrambled out of their school frocks, and Beth Anne's nimble tongue flew fast while she brushed at the tangle of her bright curls.

"You know Mrs. Drake promised Mother to have the Sewing Class for the farmer girls meet there while Mother was away, but she couldn't have the regular meeting there because Francie got the chicken-pox, and then Ben came ——"

Jinny broke in with a gurgle. "And he certainly did lead them a life at first," she laughed. "Francie used to be just like a girl before Ben came."

Beth Anne tied her hair ribbon with a dash. "Mrs. Drake almost fainted when Ben called him Pank the first time. But she thinks he's perfectly splendid now, and won't hear a word about his going back to that

lonely old house with just a housekeeper and his grandfather."

"Are the boys going to be there to-day?" asked Jinny struggling into her afternoon clothes.

"Guess not," replied Beth Anne from the depth of her closet. "Mr. Drake just gave Francie the old carriage-house for a gymnasium, and the boys are simply crazy over it."

"Oh, how splendid!" cried Jinny. "When did you hear about it? Did he give them the whole thing? Will they let us help, I wonder?"

"Don't know anything more than just that," said Beth Anne, settling her sash. "Ben 'phoned over just as I got in from school and then Car'line told me about the Sewing Class and I rushed my lessons, so as to be done when you got in, and I got awfully interested in my geography and I started to write a tiger story for the Hammond babies, and I forgot all about everything."

"When did Mary go?" asked Jinny, put-

ting on her hat. "I didn't see her anywhere down-stairs."

"Oh, she had to go to the dentist," answered Beth Anne. "Mrs. Drake didn't 'phone till after we'd gone to school, but Mary told Car'line to tell us that she wanted us to go."

"It's too bad that she can't be there," said Jinny as they slipped into their coats. "The girls know her 'most as well as us, and they love to hear her play. Aren't you glad that we could have her to take care of us while your mother and father are away?"

Beth Anne nodded emphatically. "She's awfully pretty, I think. And she's getting prettier all the time. I guess it's good for her to be out here in the country. She'd miss her father more in town, Mother said. That's why she wanted her to come out here. And then I've known her ever since I was a baby, and that makes her seem like one of the family. Mother said she couldn't have gone out with Father to help study the Indians for

three long, long months if Mary hadn't been able to come."

Jinny's thoughts traveled to the far-off camp where Mr. Burton was making sketches and studies of the Indians for a large series of wall decorations he was going to paint for the Historical Society, and where Mrs. Burton was busy with photographs of the same Indians to be used by her husband for the same purpose.

Beth Anne grabbed her gloves, slammed her closet door and shut the window. "Come along if you're ready," she said briskly. "I'll skip out and tell Car'line we're going."

The old colored cook, who had been Beth Anne's nurse, was dusting in the hall as they danced down-stairs, and they called their good-bye messages as they hurried off. They ran up the curved gravel approach to the Drakes' stately house just as Bess Hammond was being shown in the front door.

"We can't be so awfully late after all," said Jinny. "Bess is always on time."

They skipped in before the door closed and

caught Bess just as she was giving her muff and fur to the maid. She had on a new check suit and a pretty hat, and she looked so sparklingly happy that Beth Anne simply had to kiss her twice.

"You look perfectly sweet," she told her, and Bess nodded gratefully and beamed down on her crisp costume with great satisfaction.

"It's my spring suit," she explained gaily. "Aunt Molly is going to take me to Boston with her to-morrow, and so she let me have it now. Isn't it fine and dandy? I feel so splendid in everything new,—gloves and hat and all, that I don't know how to walk. I simply had to skip all the way here."

Every one knew that Aunt Molly was the source of all the pretty things that came to the Hammonds nowadays, for since Mr. Hammond's death there was little money in the big shabby house on the Hill Road, although there was plenty of love and happiness and jollity and a large supply of overflowing good humor.

"I just hate to take the coat off," Bess confessed. "I spent lots of time admiring it before I came. That's what kept me so long. I was sure I was terribly late till I saw you two celebrities tagging in after me."

Beth Anne and Jinny had given their wraps to the neat maid, who had then disappeared, and they were quite ready to go on, but Bess lingered before the long mirror, reluctant to part with the vision of her new splendor.

"I guess I'll have to take it off," she decided. "I'll simply roast if I don't ——"

"Your new waist is lovely," said Jinny soothingly. "You look sweet in it."

Bess groaned in mock distress as she slipped an arm out of her coat. "Ouch, but it hurts to take it off!" she laughed. "It's the first whole suit I've had in two years, and I've almost lived in odd skirts and odd coats —— Mercy, Francie, what *are* you up to?"

A slender boy jumping down-stairs two steps at a time bumped into Bess in his effort

to keep from slipping on the polished floor, and something hard which he had hidden under his coat gave out a tinny sound like an empty can.

Francie pulled his coat from her grasp and with one hand on the front door-knob he paused and grinned back at them.

"Going to get paint for the floor," he whispered mysteriously, and was about to vanish when a voice arrested him.

"Francis!"

Beth Anne and Jinny both started as Mrs. Drake's slender figure appeared in the drawing-room door, and a feeling of compassion for Francie's interrupted project filled them both. Bess, however, who knew nothing of the wonderful news of the gift of the old carriage-house only laughed at the expression on Francie's face as Mrs. Drake laid a caressing hand on his smooth blond head.

"You are just in time to be of service, my son," she said. "We will not detain you long," and Francie, who never disputed his

mother's command, slipped behind the portière and dropped something into the huge Japanese umbrella stand in the hall.

There was a babble of voices in the small drawing-room and the sun-parlor was filled with rather quiet groups of girls who were beginning to fold their work and stow it in the big wicker basket which had been so familiar to Beth Anne when the Sewing Class had been her mother's own private project.

"Did Ben tell you?" Francie said eagerly to Beth Anne as he joined her in the bustle of serving the refreshments.

"Yes, indeed, and I think it's the most perfectly splendid thing I ever heard of!" cried Beth Anne. "Jinny is just wild over it, too. Have you told Bess?"

"Haven't had time," he answered. "We only got it ourselves at noon to-day. Dad gave me the key just as the whistle was blowing, and the last man stopped work on the new garage. Say, isn't she a dandy?"

Beth Anne nodded with less interest. "I

suppose it's the finest garage in the village," she began when Francie interrupted her scornfully.

"I wasn't talking of that old garage," he snorted. "I mean our new Gym. I tell you it's the dandiest place you ever saw. I'll show it to you if we've time."

"Are you going to let us girls help fix it up?" asked Beth Anne, cautiously. "We have lots of things that we'd lend. Just Jinny and Bess and me, you know."

"I'll have to ask Ben," he said doubtfully. "I guess we'll have you, though. It'll make things livelier to have you girls. But we won't have any others, except Tom and Fred when they're home from school."

"Let's tell Bess," whispered Beth Anne, radiant with delight at the prospect of being partners in this new enterprise. "She hasn't heard a word yet."

The girls of the Sewing Circle were dispatching their sandwiches and cake and ice-cream with their usual steady businesslike prompt-

ness, and there was need of quick service, so it was not until the refreshments had been disposed of and the girls were ready to go that the three had an opportunity to get together.

Bess was as much excited and delighted as though the carriage-house had been a beautiful palace which was to be her very own. She even went so far as to lament her trip to Boston, since it took her away at this precise moment.

"If Aunt Molly had only happened to choose next week," she sighed, "I'd have had a chance to see it all and help such a lot. But now I'll go off for three whole days, and dear knows what will happen before I get back."

"We'll be having the first Gym meeting there next Saturday," Francie told her. "So it's a good thing you're going this week after all. You want to be home for that, sure, for it's going to be something extra fine, I can tell you."

Bess brightened and Beth Anne and Jinny

fairly beamed at this good news. "How perfectly gorgeous!" cried Bess happily. "I'm in luck as usual. Perhaps Aunt Molly will let me bring home something for the Gym,—a cushion or pennant ——"

"We've lots of old studio draperies in the attic," cried Beth Anne suddenly. "Couldn't you use them, Francie? Mother was going to throw them away, so I'm sure we could have them."

"I tell you what," said Francie, an inspiration coming visibly to him. "We'll give you girls one end of the big room to fix up for yourselves, tea table and all that. I'll ask Ben if we can't. And then you can do just as you like with it, and you won't be bothering us fellows. We'll have the Gym end all to ourselves, you see."

Beth Anne couldn't for the life of her resist hugging him on the spot, and that broke up the talk, for Francie hated public demonstrations and promptly fled, leaving the three girls to say their farewells and make their way out

into the early twilight as quickly as they could.

They were brimming over with chatter about their hopes and plans, and it was only the lateness of the hour that kept them from flying back to the old carriage-house and rushing in on Ben and Francie. The ornamental new garage which had supplanted the carriage-house was resplendent with shining windows and fresh shingles, but they had no eyes for anything save the shabby stucco building with the mansard roof where such delightful things might be going on.

"We've got to go right home, I suppose," said Beth Anne sadly. "I promised Mother to be in before dark while she was away."

"Me too," said Bess with cheerful resignation. "Tiny asked me to help with her examples, and I've got to pack to-night, too."

She said a cheery good-bye and ran off, and they started home, eager to tell the great news to Mary Stone, and talk it over with her.

As they passed the entrance to Stepping

Stones, as the Doane place was called, two men came out of the gate and passed them.

One man was speaking in a deep rich voice, and he sounded as though he were used to giving orders that were promptly obeyed.

"Have the matters attended to at once, if you please. I wish to get out into the country as early as possible."

Beth Anne clutched Jinny's arm, and they both listened eagerly for the reply. "I shall certainly attend to them immediately, Mr. Van Meter. You may rely on me perfectly, Mr. Van Meter," said the red whiskered Mr. Sims, speaking with unusual respect. And then they were gone.

Jinny nodded triumphantly at Beth Anne. "What did I tell you?" she said gleefully. "I knew he wasn't poking around there for nothing. He's going to take the place, and perhaps he'll have some children,—nice girls and boys, too. That house is so splendid for hide-and-seek and charades."

Beth Anne caught eagerly at this new idea.

"He looks sort of fatherly to me," she confided with a wag of her bright head. "And I'm sure he has at least one girl, by the way he looked at us,—sort of judging-like, as if he wanted to see whether she'd like us or not."

"Beth Anne Burton, he never thought of us at all!" Jinny cried in laughing surprise. "He stepped past us as if we were empty air, and I don't believe he even saw us."

Beth Anne experienced a change of heart at this, and went swiftly back to her original idea. Her eyes grew absent and a very diverting picture rose in her mind. Mr. Van Meter as a father of children ceased to be a possibility to her and she saw him as a solitary recluse shutting out the world among the rose-gardens and summer-houses of Stepping Stones.

"I do believe he's a hermit after all," she said slowly with the picture growing clearer and clearer to her active imagination. "You see, he's still in the world and so he wears

worldly clothes, but after he moves in,—why, gracious goodness me, he may wear all sorts of traily robes and rope girdles and big beards!"

"Oh, Beth Anne!" remonstrated Jinny half laughing at this fantasy. "You know he won't do any such thing!"

Beth Anne wagged her bright curls impressively.

"Mark my words, Jinny Randolph," she said slowly. "You'll see something very strange and exciting when Mr. Van Meter moves into Stepping Stones. I feel it in my bones that something is going to happen then."

Jinny laughed out loud at this, and Beth Anne, coming suddenly back to her every-day self, laughed too. But she did not take back her prophecy, and in spite of their laughter both she and Jinny were rather impressed by it as they ran off home through the twilight.

"I wonder how soon he'll come," said

Jinny as they turned into the long driveway at Gable End.

"Pretty soon, I guess," hazarded Beth Anne. "Oh, there's a light in Mary's room. Let's hurry and tell her all about the Gym and everything. I'll race you to the front steps."

"All right," agreed Jinny, and off they flew.

CHAPTER II

BETH ANNE'S GREAT IDEA

"I DON'T suppose you would object to an outsider's making a small contribution to this wonderful Gym of yours?"

It was two whole days later and Mary was smiling at them over the breakfast urn. Beth Anne thought she looked very pretty indeed this morning with the teasing light dancing in her brown eyes and the dimple deepening in her pale cheek. In the month of her mother's absence she had never quite become used to Mary as an every-day member of the family, and it seemed like "having company" to see her at the head of the table.

"Oh, we'd love it!" she cried promptly. "We need such lots of stuff besides drapery things that came from the old studio."

Mary laughed at her eagerness. "I ven-

tured to get something when I was in town yesterday," she said. "Something rather small and plain and useful."

Beth Anne was not to be dampened. "It doesn't matter what it is," she cried, bouncing up to rush around and kiss Mary on her dimple. "It's sure to be lovely if you got it."

"You always get just the right things, Mary dear," said Jinny warmly. "I know we'll just love it. Do tell us what it is."

"Oh, do please!" besought Beth Anne. "I can't eat another mouthful till I know."

Mary pretended to be very stern. "Not till you've finished every scrap of toast and the last morsel of egg," she said with mock severity. "It isn't anything to eat, I can assure you, although it does belong to the vegetable kingdom."

Beth Anne looked at Jinny and Jinny stared at Beth Anne, each repeating in puzzled wonder, "Vegetable kingdom. Vegetable kingdom."

Then Beth Anne broke out, "I know! It's

a flower in a pot,—that's small," she said with a tiny tinge of disappointment in her tone.

"But it isn't useful," cried Jinny. "Mary said it was plain and useful."

"Oh, dear, what can it be?" sighed Beth Anne, swallowing her toast recklessly to make an end of it. "Will you tell us the minute we've finished, Mary? I'm just about done now."

Mary smiled at the plate which had been cleared with such dispatch. "I should have put in a prohibition against swallowing your breakfast whole," she said. "You are both behaving like ostriches or anacondas or crocodiles ——"

"But we've both finished," interrupted Beth Anne, too eager to wait for Mary to finish the sentence. "Now we'll know right off!"

Mary's face lost its pretty gaiety. "Beth Anne dear, I think I shall have to wait until the present comes home, just to make you remember your promise about interrupting.

That's the second time this morning, and I'm afraid you'll forget again if we don't remind you of it."

Beth Anne looked rueful, but she knew she had been at fault and she knew also that Mary hated to be stern. "I won't ask another word about it," she said penitently. "I guess I'll remember to be politer for a long, long time,—it's so terribly hard to wait for nice exciting things like presents for our Gym."

"Of course Jinny may know now if she likes ——" began Mary with her desire to be just struggling with her love for Beth Anne, but Jinny broke in with a protest.

"Indeed, I'd rather wait, too!" she cried, earnestly.

Beth Anne gave a squeal. "There, you've done it yourself, Jinny-pinny!" she gurgled. "You've interrupted Mary, and you're as bad as I am now."

Mary and Jinny both had to laugh at her delighted face, and Mary said in a relieved

tone, "That settles it. After school you may both come to my room. Now run along, or you'll be late."

All through the long hours of the morning —hours which usually went swiftly for Beth Anne, who loved the sociability of school-time, the two girls racked their brains for something that might belong to the vegetable kingdom and yet be plain and useful.

Beth Anne missed her first conjugation, and Jinny broke down on her favorite history, and yet at the end of the session they were no nearer anything definite than before.

"It might be wood or it might be paper," said Jinny as they hurried home still discussing the matter. "There are such lots of things in the vegetable kingdom."

"A book's paper and a scrap-basket's wood," said Beth Anne wisely. "And they might be pretty useful, you know."

"Particularly if it were a book on etiquette," added Jinny with a memory of their breakfast talk.

There was no book in sight, however, nor the sign of a new scrap-basket in Mary's dainty room when they rushed on her as she sat quietly writing letters. Her big screen stood across the corner of the room at an unusual angle, but there was nothing else to suggest a surprise.

She gave them the customary kiss and then said brightly, "I am sure you are both ready for the small present. If you'll look about a while perhaps you may come upon it. I warn you it's useful," and then she pretended to turn to go on with her writing but it was only a pretense, for when she saw Beth Anne's blue eyes and Jinny's dark ones sweeping about the room in search of packages, she laughed a low ripple of amusement.

"Perhaps I may as well tell you that it's hidden," she smiled.

Beth Anne and Jinny cried out together as their eyes fell on the misplaced screen, "There it is!" and they made a dash for it.

As Jinny pushed aside the screen Beth

Anne fairly hopped up and down with delight.

"Oh, oh, oh!" she cried, clapping her hands together in a rapture. "It's just what we wanted, but we never knew it!"

"It's too beautiful for words," echoed Jinny fervently. "Bess and the boys will be crazy over it."

The brown wicker table was covered with a pretty white linen cloth with the quaintest birds and flowers wandering all over it and a pile of napkins in the same fascinating pattern lay on one side of the table.

Mary received their breathless rejoicings and endured their wild embraces with a very good grace. "I am glad you like it," she said gaily. "I was in two minds about getting a set of chocolate cups, but I remembered that you'd need a table and cloth first."

Beth Anne walked around the table surveying it from every side. "You couldn't have found a prettier one," she said fervidly. "We can use any kind of plates and cups,

but we couldn't have such a splendid-looking table and lovely cloth. And to think, Jinny-pinny," she ended with a prance of joy, "that it's all ours, for keeps!"

"It's the best vegetable I ever saw," laughed Jinny squeezing Mary's hand again.

Mary reached down behind her desk, bringing up a parcel that was square and bulky.

"Your reports came home last week," she said, "and I was told by two good fairies who are not here just now that if the averages were unusually good there was to be a present to whoever had the highest."

Beth Anne squealed with pride and nudged Jinny, who looked embarrassed. "You've got it, Jinny Randolph!" she cried impulsively. "I heard Miss Martha say that your drawings and maps were the best of the lot."

Mary held up a finger. "Interrupting again, Beth Anne?" and then as she saw the happy light die out of Beth Anne's sparkling face she said quickly, "Never mind it for this time. But you are wrong about the prize-

winner. Jinny got some poor marks in arithmetic and you have all good marks—and so you both had precisely the same average, ninety-five—for the first and only time in your lives, perhaps. So you both get the present," and she handed it to them.

The papers and lid came off the box in a jiffy and Beth Anne held the box while Jinny lifted out the tissue wrapped bundle and set it carefully on the table.

"Plates!" cried Beth Anne trembling with eagerness to see them, and when the first paper was torn off and the dainty blue and white china plates came out of their covers, she pranced about rubbing her hands and tossing her curls in a perfect bubble of satisfaction.

Jinny hugged Mary in an ecstasy and breathlessly prophesied the delight of the boys when they saw this unexpected addition to the cherished Gym.

"George shall take it over whenever you want it to go," said Mary. "Shall I send for him now?"

Beth Anne and Jinny looked suddenly depressed. "They won't want it on the fresh paint," said Beth Anne regretfully.

"They're doing the floor this afternoon," Jinny explained to Mary. "They're painting it all over to cover the stains of the harness dressing, and it won't be dry for ever so long."

So it was settled that the table and its burden should wait till the other scraps of furniture were being moved in, and Beth Anne and Jinny danced off to tell the boys the good news.

They found them just finishing the task of painting the big floor. Ben was putting on the last stroke as they ran up the narrow stairs and burst into the room. Both he and Francie were as enthusiastic as any one could wish.

"I tell you what, we're going to make this old place look pretty slick," said Ben, resting on his knees with the brush in one grimy hand and a big brown smear across his cheer-

ful face. "You girls'll have your part fixed up fine and dandy, and we'll soon have the sporting end of it in great shape, shan't we, Pank?"

Francie rubbed his soiled fingers on his handkerchief as he rose stiffly. "You bet we will," he responded emphatically. "Wait till you see it, Beth Anne. We aren't going to tell you, though. You've got to wait till Saturday."

"How are we going to fix our end if we can't see yours?" asked Jinny, with a laugh.

Ben laughed at Francie's puzzled face and suggested, "Hang up a sheet or something, can't you? That'll keep them from peeping."

"Let us fix our part first," said Jinny, eagerly. "Bess will be home on Thursday and the floor will be dry then. We can get all our stuff up and then you boys can have Friday and Saturday morning to finish your part."

This was promptly agreed to, and they fell

to discussing the entertainment that they had planned for a sort of house-warming on Saturday afternoon.

"It looks to me as if we mightn't be able to make it for this week after all," said Ben soberly. "It's a whacking lot of work to finish all we're going to do, and I'd rather put the show off than have the place half done, wouldn't you, Jinny?"

Jinny agreed, but Francie protested, and they argued peaceably, while Beth Anne sat on the soap-box in the doorway and built castles in the air, planning the good times they were all to have in this splendid property of Francie Drake's.

Suddenly she sat up with her face glowing.

"Why don't we have a club?" she asked. "Just us five? Meet Saturday afternoons and ——"

"Great idea, Beth Anne!" cried Ben, catching her enthusiasm instantly, while Francie and Jinny joined in the excited chorus of approval.

"We never thought of it, did we?" said Francie, wondering at his own slowness. "We ought to have started right off. Let's begin. We'll be an athletic club ——"

"Where'll the girls come in?" asked Ben with unusual thoughtfulness. "They won't want to be doing stunts all the time. We'll just have a plain club and ——"

"Let's make it a social club," suggested Jinny. "Then we can have sports or parties or anything for the Saturday meetings."

This met with instant approval, and it was voted that the new club should be a social organization, with Ben for president and Beth Anne, as author of the idea, for vice-president, while Francie had the imposing post of general manager and Jinny, on account of her good penmanship, was chosen secretary. Bess, who was absent, was given the less attractive office of treasurer.

"What shall we name it?" demanded Francie, aflame with enthusiasm.

Beth Anne's face flashed with a sudden

glow. "Let's call it the Grow Straight Club!" she cried. "It's a perfectly splendid name for a Gym club, isn't it, Jinny?"

As usual Jinny stuck loyally to Beth Anne's proposition, but the others were rather lukewarm over this second suggestion from Beth Anne. They preferred "Boanerges" or mysterious initials like "C. C. C." but at last in default of finding a title that would fit all around they rather reluctantly accepted the name, and Jinny scribbled it down on the leaf of an old blank-book.

"The Grow Straight Club of Centreville," she read out proudly, and added the list of officers with a flourish.

"Now for the Constitution and By-laws," said Ben, importantly. "We've got to have them, you know."

So, with a great deal of argument and a vast lot of writing in and scribbling out and substituting large words for small ones, the task was accomplished and the document, which was ceremoniously referred to as

"The Constitution and By-laws of the Grow Straight Club of Centreville," was ready for the secretary to take home and copy out in a brand new book, to be purchased for the club record by that busy official, the others being hopelessly bankrupt.

"Do you know," said Jinny confidentially as they skipped off to make their purchase, "I don't care awfully for that name, Beth Anne. It doesn't sound very jolly to me. It makes me think of cripples and ——"

"Oh, Jinny, why didn't you say so!" cried Beth Anne in dismay, stopping stock still and regarding her friend with round eyes of reproach. "You know I wouldn't want it if you didn't like it. I thought it was so lovely when it came popping into my head ——"

"I guess it's all right," broke in Jinny, slipping her hand into Beth Anne's. "I guess it's just because it didn't seem to mean anything much to me. What made you think of it, anyway?"

Beth Anne hesitated. "Do you remember the Christmas tree when you first came to us after you had rescued me and David from that dreadful Italian?"

Jinny nodded eagerly. "It was the first Christmas tree I'd ever seen inside a house and I'll never forget it," she said earnestly.

"Do you remember what Mother said about its growing straight?" persisted Beth Anne with her eyes beginning to sparkle.

Jinny shook her head.

"I thought it was worth growing in the forest so many summers and winters to be so splendid and sparkly on Christmas day, and I said if I were a tree I'd like to end up just that way: and then Mother said that if it hadn't grown straight it wouldn't have been chosen from all the other trees. She sort of made me think of people being like trees in that way,—that they had to grow straight to be fit to have good times, you know. So when I got the diphtheria from the Seraphinos after I had been so piggy last summer and had been

so selfish and hateful to you, I began to think about it while I was getting well : and when we had such a perfectly splendid time at the studio party I knew that Mother was right,—that you had to grow straight to be happy. So I thought out a motto and wrote it down in my new diary and I got just to love the name, and when it came popping into my head I couldn't help saying it right out."

Jinny's face was eager. "What is the motto?" she asked impulsively.

Beth Anne looked a bit embarrassed. She enjoyed playing the heroine in her own day-dreams but she was getting over the wish to impress people with her goodness. She blushed as she replied :

"'Others First.' It sounds awfully stupid, doesn't it? But when I feel like being real piggy I write 'Others First' in big letters in my diary and it does help,—really-for-truly, it does."

Jinny squeezed her hand and her eyes showed she was thinking rapidly.

"Bess will like that motto," she said heartily. "I don't see why we three girls can't try that sort of Grow Straight work ourselves. We'll keep it to ourselves, though, and just try to be jollier than ever ——"

Beth Anne broke in with a delighted prance. "Jinny-pinny, you're a perfect duck!" she cried. "I was getting sort of lonely about that motto and now it'll be twice as easy to remember when there are three of us to think about it. We'll help each other lots, won't we? And maybe we may help other people, too."

"We won't tell a soul," warned Jinny with her hand on the latch of the shop where they bought their school supplies. "We don't want to have anybody make fun of us."

Beth Anne giggled. "I guess Francie and Ben would have a fit if they heard us talk," she said. "They're awfully ashamed of showing off goody-goody, though they're the best boys we know."

"Boys are like that," said Jinny briefly.

"But I guess we shan't disgrace them by being too saintly," and she opened the door with a click.

They bought the best blank-book in stock, though it took every cent Jinny had, and they came out on the step feeling that the Grow Straight Club was more of a reality than ever now that the secretary had a fat gilt-edged, green-backed book of the club's very own tucked under her arm.

Beth Anne pranced with delight at the prospect of the delectable task of assisting the secretary to ink in the penciled notes.

"Aren't we going to have heaps of fun?" she crowed, jigging along on her toes. "Oh, I wish Bess were home and the old floor were dry. I'll simply *sizz* all to pieces if I can't get into that Gym pretty soon and begin things!"

CHAPTER III

JOSEPH AND HIS BRETHREN

BETH ANNE scrambled out of bed a full hour before she heard any stir in the rooms across the hall, where Jinny and Mary Stone slept, and with the memory of the absorbing evening spent on the green and gold book, hurried noiselessly through the process of bath and dressing, with all her nimble mind set full upon this new adventure of the Grow Straight Club.

The sun was shining gaily in through the wide windows and the notes of the cardinal, who with his sober mate had spent the winter in the deserted garden shrubberies, sounded close and clear,—"Cheo-cheo-cheo-cheo!"

Beth Anne flew to the window, and there on the rim of the feeding pan among the cedars, she caught a flash of vivid red, and

saw the cardinal feeding his plain little mate with great care and attention.

"Why, he's getting unselfish, too!" she cried in pleased surprise. "He's been perfectly horrid all winter, gobbling up everything nice before she could get a snip of it. I wonder what made him change,—he hasn't any Grow Straight Club to help him. I wonder ——"

She stood with her eyes following the drifting cloud that was floating up past the white-splotched bare branches of the big sycamore, and dreaming a bright day-dream until the whistle of a distant train roused her. Then she laughed a little low laugh at her own forgetfulness.

"Why, of course, it's getting near the time those cardinals will begin to build their nests," she thought. "Father told me to look out for them in March, and see where they built, and that biggoty, dressed-up bird is just being nice to her to make her work better,—the mean thing! All he cares about is to strut

about and show off." Her bright face clouded a bit as she added, very much to herself indeed, "As I used to do last summer."

She was quite still for a moment sighing and frowning at the memory, and then her face cleared and she turned from the window with a whirl. "I'm wasting time," she said, briskly. "The getting-up train's past the station, and I haven't begun on my diary. I've two whole days to catch up with, for I do want to start in to-day fair and square with everything in the world."

She sat down to the old desk and hauled the red diary No. 2 out from the secret drawer, patting its already ink-stained cover with real affection. "You're going to have something inside of you pretty soon that will surprise you, my dear," she whispered and, with her eyes alight with enthusiasm, she began to write.

Her pen scratched on through the prosy happenings of the past two days, dwelling

a little on the new tenant of "Stepping Stones," and lingering on the club and its purpose.

"I hope I'll do better," she wrote with much enjoyment. "I have quiet feelings now, all smooth and pearly, and I say my prayers morning *and* night. I wonder if I'd like to be a nun, or whether I shall be a great saint, like those in the church windows, with their pieced-up halos and robes that you'd tumble over if you tried to walk in them, and such clean bare feet, though they always stand on messy rocks, too."

She paused, nibbling her pen and weighing these two rival vocations, and with a sigh, finally decided on the saint.

"Nuns are always grown up," she thought ruefully. "And besides, they don't have them nowadays in our church. I wish I could see the window they'll make for me. I'd like a lot of blue sky and green trees back of me, and palm trees ——"

Bang! A white tennis shoe landed plump

on the page, and Beth Anne jumped up spluttering.

"Who—what? Where'd that come from?" she demanded indignantly of Jinny who suddenly appeared flushed and breathless at the door. "What did you throw that shoe at me for?"

Jinny, seeing the offending shoe safe and harmless on the desk, gurgled in relief.

"Oh, I was *so* afraid that it had hit you!" she cried. "I was aiming at a spider on the door-jamb and—I missed him!"

"I should think you did," returned Beth Anne with spirit. "I should think you'd known better,—you know you can't throw worth a cent! I should think ——"

"Oh, don't be cross, Beth Anne dear," said Jinny, gently, touching Beth Anne's hand with tender soothing fingers. "You know I didn't mean to disturb you. Why, I didn't even know you were up. You've been as quiet as a whole regiment of mice."

Beth Anne was mollified, but gloomy.

"I'm not cross," she said; "I'm only sad. You're dreadfully thoughtless, Jinny dear. I hope you'll try to get over it."

Jinny's great eyes lighted with a flash of resentment, but just as swiftly her face cleared and she nodded brightly. "That's something for our end of the G. S.," she agreed. "I'll start in on it right away."

Beth Anne, fresh from the high aspirations of her diary, felt great satisfaction in this ready submission. "I guess I'll have to help you overcome it," she said with a touch of her old spirit.

The breakfast gong struck in its welcome summons, and whatever reply Jinny might have intended was lost in the pleasant bustle of putting away the diary, flinging open the bedroom windows, and racing down to the sunny breakfast-room where Mary Stone smiled a bright greeting to them and returned their good-morning kisses with warm affection.

Beth Anne's brain was still busy with

bright visions of a thoroughly reformed future, and she was lost to the small details of every-day life, and sat absently intent on her own thoughts while breakfast was being served and the other two chatted. The old-time spirit was rising within her, and the love of showing off, which had been conquered for so long, was beginning to stir.

She sugared her oatmeal so sparingly that there was little flavor to it. She spoke very little, but with such honied sweetness that her satisfaction with herself was at its height when she drew Jinny to one side in the hall and whispered in her ear.

"Don't you think it would be nice to visit the poor and read the Bible to them?" she asked, with glowing benevolence. It was plain that her high horse had run away with her and left her common-sense behind.

Jinny's smooth brow puckered. She felt somehow that this plan was not a good one. "I don't know ——" she began in a perplexed way.

Beth Anne cut her short.

"Of course you want to," she cried hotly. "Why, Virginia Randolph, I'm ashamed of you,—not wanting to do good."

"We-l-l," capitulated Jinny, giving in with as good a grace as she could muster, "maybe it will be all right. Only it seemed sort of uppity and—and ——"

"No such thing!" retorted Beth Anne with her old-time vehemence. "It's your duty to do all you can. 'Others First,' you know. Come along."

"But where?" asked Jinny in real dismay. "Whom are you going to read to? I'm not going a step if you don't tell me."

Mary Stone passed through the hall and paused on the stair. "Want any help?" she asked in a pleasant way that disarmed resentment.

Beth Anne explained eagerly yet without revealing too much of their intentions.

"Why not take that cushion to Mrs. Harper and read some bright story to her?

The new magazines have come, and she loves stories."

Beth Anne puffed out her lips in scornful rejection. "She's good already," she protested. "I want some one who needs re-generation."

"Why not go see lame Katy?" asked Mary. "She is a dear little thing. I'll give you some hemming I have for Mrs. Jones, and you can do the errand for me as well as reading to Katy, who, I'm afraid, is often rather lonesome."

"We-ell," hesitated Beth Anne, "I suppose we'll have to take her, as we can't think of anybody else, but it's sort of a come-down. Katy's awfully good." She brightened as an idea struck her. "But the boys are perfect imps!" she cried happily. "Maybe we'll see them."

Mary said nothing, but when they appeared in hats and coats, she had the parcel ready for them, and a word of caution also.

"Read about Joseph to Katy if you like,—

I know how you love that story," she said kindly. "But I wouldn't try to do anything with those Jones boys if I were you. Mrs. Jones may tell you some of her wonderful Irish fairy stories if you ask her," she added to Jinny. "She knows a lot of the best sort, and she tells them as only an Irishwoman can."

Jinny looked more hopeful, but Beth Anne shook her head.

"I'm going to read about Joseph," she said firmly, "and I don't think we ought to mix our minds up with pixies and banshees. We're going to entertain Katy, anyway, and I guess she knows all she wants to about those Irish fairies."

Jinny glanced at Mary, expecting a rebuke for Beth Anne's rudeness; but Mary merely smiled, and said gently:

"Run along now. Remember, your practising begins at eleven, and try to give Katy a pleasant morning."

Beth Anne danced down the steps to the graveled path with eager feet.

"Katy'll be crazy over Joseph and His Brethren," she cried. "Just you wait till you hear me read it!"

"I've heard it lots of times," said Jinny, beginning to take an interest, now that the expedition was really under way. "I like the story of Moses better, though. He was so splendid, to leave all the grand things he had in the palace and go out in the desert to be a shepherd."

"Pooh, that's nothing," said Beth Anne loftily. "Father says lots of rich men in India leave their riches and go out along the road with a bowl and beg for their living, and they are mere heathen. Joseph was a lot nicer than Moses. He was twice as clever. Anybody can go off and leave things, but Joseph started poor and got to be next to the king and had servants and palaces and—and lots of things."

Jinny had no chance to defend her favorite, as the Jones cottage was near at hand and they had reached the door as Beth Anne

spoke. They were ushered into the spotless little room where Katy sat alone with her cat on a cushion at her poor twisted feet and her canary swinging in its gilt cage over her head.

She was a sweet little creature with a gentle pinched face and a pair of serene blue eyes, and her heavy dark hair fell in careful waves to the seat of the big rocking-chair where she sat. Everything about her spoke of love and care and poverty patiently borne. Jinny marveled at Beth Anne's indifference to the radiant welcome which shone on the pretty wistful face, but Beth Anne had eyes for nothing save the big book of Bible stories.

"Where are the boys?" she asked immediately, as they settled themselves in two chairs which Katy had wished them to place directly in front of her. "I'm going to read Bible stories and they ought to hear. They're pretty bad boys, aren't they?" she asked with an eager look which seemed to puzzle Katy.

"Oh, they're not so awful bad," their sister

defended. "They're just a bit mischeevious, that's all. They're out now, runnin' errants for Mrs. Dooley that's sick with the pleurisy. That's where me mother was a-hurryin' to when she let you in just now."

"Well, maybe they'll come in later," Beth Anne ventured to hope. "And then we'll see what can be done with them."

She resigned herself to the rather tame occupation of reading to the very quiet little girl, with this brighter prospect in view, but as the minutes slipped past and the story gradually absorbed her, she forgot all about the sinners and began to enjoy herself immensely.

Jinny for her part was only too thankful that the boys were not at home, for she knew something of the class to which the Jones boys might belong and she had no wish to be one of the reform party which should tackle them. She breathed more freely as the story went smoothly on and the fear of interruption grew less and less.

Katy sat very still, keeping her eyes shyly fixed on the reader, following with deep and undivided interest the trials and triumphs of the princely Joseph.

Beth Anne's voice rose and fell in the silence, and though Jinny was listening with interest she was not so absorbed as Beth Anne nor so eager as Katy, and so she unconsciously noted the other sounds in and about the little house,—the cries of the hucksters on the street, the clink of the ashes in the grate of the stove, and, gradually, those other muffled sounds that seemed to come from the kitchen. If Mrs. Jones had been at home or the boys had come in Jinny could have accounted for them, but she had seen Mrs. Jones cross the street to the sick neighbor's house, and no one had either come in or gone out since, so far as she could see. So she put the muffled noises down to some outside causes and tried to keep up with Joseph.

Then there was an unmistakable giggle. Jinny glanced in alarm at the closed door of

the kitchen, then at Beth Anne and Katy, but they were both as intent on Joseph as ever, so she merely kept still and waited. The silence was unbroken save for Beth Anne's clear voice, and Jinny began to feel relieved. Then, very, very softly the kitchen door opened and closed again with a sound of muffled laughter.

Jinny gasped and sat up straight, for into the room trotted the funniest figure she had ever seen.

It had an old hat tied under its chin and a very shabby coat with big patches at the elbows, and it wore a pair of tattered trousers evidently belonging to the incorrigible brothers of the good little Katy. Around its furry neck hung a pasteboard placard.

At Jinny's little cry it stopped stock still, and sitting up on its patched trousers, waved its baggy coat sleeves gaily, and she saw that it was a large Newfoundland dog, dressed up as a tramp and begging in good earnest.

"Oh, you funny thing!" she cried. "Where did you come from?"

Katy gave a low pained exclamation, but Beth Anne flung down her book to rush and pat the queer-looking object, calling him all sorts of pet names. He would have none of her, however, and he slunk to Katy with his bushy tail tucked ridiculously between his bloomers.

"What is that on his neck?" asked Beth Anne, giggling at the picture he made with his head in Katy's lap.

Katy fumbled with the string of the placard and pulled it off. As she glanced at it, she gave a start, and looking troubled and ashamed, tried to keep it from Beth Anne, but Beth Anne hung over her shoulder and insisted on seeing it, while Jinny, peering over the other shoulder, read the crooked yet unmistakable lettering.

"PLEAS read good Storeys to me, for i am a nawful sinner, i stole a bone & i killed a hole lot of flees."

Jinny gave a snort of laughter as the meaning of it broke on her, while poor Katy, seeing

the sudden spark of fire in Beth Anne's eye, quavered out:

"The boys is always playin' tricks. They don't mean half——"

Beth Anne interrupted her hotly. All her good intentions dropped away. "You may think it's funny," she said to the trembling Katy. "But I think it's disgusting. It's making fun of the Bible! And that's a good bit worse than making fun of me!"

"Oh, please don't——" began Katy again as Beth Anne caught up her coat and gloves and made for the door. "Please!"

Beth Anne flashed around on her with crimson cheeks and blazing eyes. "Those boys ought to be in prison,—doing a thing like that," she flared, grasping her book of Bible stories tightly and flinging the door open for her exit.

A giggle from the kitchen seemed to answer her.

Beside herself with vexation, she flung one final word.

"It's a wonder that bears don't eat them!" she cried hotly. Turning on the step she called, "Come along, Jinny. They're too bad to waste time on."

Jinny paused only a second to pat poor Katy's heaving shoulder and whisper some words of comfort. "Don't you mind," she said with hasty kindness. "I think it was awfully funny, and Beth Anne will, too, when she gets over her mad. She likes you lots anyway." Then, leaving Katy somewhat comforted, she sped after the indignant missionary.

She caught up to her as she was crossing the road.

"I wouldn't care about those boys," she urged, subduing the laughter which was bubbling again. "It's only their fun."

"Pretty sort of fun," spluttered Beth Anne, much hurt at Jinny's delay. "Good for them it isn't Old Testament times. I guess they wouldn't like being eaten by bears. Serve them right, too!"

"It was your fault, wanting to see them after Mary had told you not," declared Jinny, carried away by her sense of justice.

Beth Anne stopped and looked her straight in the eyes. This insurrection on Jinny's part was the last straw. She forgot her beautiful new rule entirely. She forgot her vows of eternal friendship to Jinny.

"So you are teaching me how to behave, Miss Virginia Randolph," she said bitterly. "I guess you think you'd have known how to teach those boys, too?"

Jinny reddened. Her own temper was ruffled at Beth Anne's injustice, but she had it under good control. Besides, she realized that Beth Anne's anger would quickly pass, and so she kept resolutely silent.

Her silence was a sort of shock to Beth Anne. Her face changed. She blushed and stopped stock still in the middle of the road.

"Oh, Jinny dearest, I'm the forgetting-est

worst person in the whole world!" she cried, softening to swift remorse. "I'm as bad as I was last summer about the code! I'm sorry, Jinny dear, really-for-truly I am."

Jinny kissed her warmly in full sight of the passing baker-wagon.

"You're my dearest Beth Anne," she said warmly. "And I don't care if you do forget. I love you just the same."

"I was showing off," confessed Beth Anne contritely. "That's what I was doing. I was perfectly horrid, but I'll never do it again. I hate to think of being so silly!" and she sighed, making a very rueful face.

"Don't care any more about it," counseled Jinny wisely. "I don't care a bit. Come on down to the post-office. The ten o'clock ought to be almost in by this time."

"Oh, dear! I guess I'll never keep on being worth two pins!" lamented Beth Anne. "I'm like that frog in the well that climbed up three feet every day and fell back again every night.

I'll have to go right back and make up with Katy," she said with an effort. It was evident that she had come back to her best self again.

Jinny agreed eagerly and they accomplished their errand of peace with great satisfaction to Katy and themselves, and then they started for the mail, skipping along hand in hand in the best of recovered spirits, chattering with all their might about the Gym and the delightful work that was to be done there and predicting brilliant things for the meetings of the Grow Straight Club.

Suddenly Beth Anne gave a giggle. "Wasn't I a goose,—wanting to reform those boys!" she said with that clear vision of herself that came to her once in a while. "And I felt so terribly good, too. It's funny how silly I am when I *try* to do specially splendid things. I guess I'll let the specially things alone after this."

Jinny nodded approval. "There's such a lot of things that are more fun," she agreed.

"It's all right to be good, but it's perfectly sickening to be stuck up about it."

Beth Anne laughed happily. "Well, I'm done with that nonsense," she said crisply. "Is that the stage at the store?"

CHAPTER IV

CAP'N DAN'L ARRIVES

THE mail was not yet in, so they sauntered about keeping an eye on the store and ready to turn about the moment they saw the stage drive up to the side-door.

Beth Anne searched the crossroads for something of interest.

"Why, what in the world is Miss Carrie cleaning on Saturday morning for? She always does the parlor on Tuesdays."

Jinny looked down the back road, and there, sure enough, on the porch of the neat little house where Miss Carrie lived with her deaf old Cousin Angeline, was an array of red plush furniture shining in the sun while rugs and mats littered the wooden steps.

Miss Carrie was Beth Anne's particular friend among the village people, and the two

girls spent many pleasant hours in the garden or sitting-room of her trim comfortable house. Beth Anne knew the regularity of that house and wondered what could have happened so to upset the methodical routine.

"Let's go see," she suggested, dancing off before Jinny could reply. And Jinny followed very willingly.

Miss Carrie in a sort of helmet dust-cap, with her kind eyes twinkling with energy, answered their greetings with absent kindness. It was plain that she had important business on her mind. When they said they were only stopping at the gate on their way to the mail her face beamed with relief, and she confessed that she was in a mortal hurry.

"For you see, we've just got word that another one of Angeline's cousins,—sea capting this time, and without chick nor child (being a bachelor-man), is coming to visit us for a spell. Goodness knows what put it in his head, though he did use to live here when he was knee-high to a grasshopper, and good-

ness knows what we're to do with him when he does get here. We ain't much used to men-folks and sea captings are such stirabouts."

"They must be awfully nice to talk to," said Beth Anne, her eyes dancing. "They've been such lots of places."

Miss Carrie gave a snort, partly contempt, partly exasperation.

"Lands knows what he'll be like," she said, giving the duster a vigorous shake. "I only know he's sandy complected and mortal slow of letting a body know when he's due. He wrote a week ago, but he must have forgot to post it, for Sam Sellers just brought it in now. He may come right in on us before we're redd up,—lands knows," and she flew to her task with redoubled energy.

"May we come and see him when he does come?" asked Beth Anne in a flutter of excitement. "I'm sorry, though, that he hasn't any little girl, like Mr. Jont, who visited you last spring."

"Maybe it's a blessing he hasn't," said Miss

Carrie, darkly. "He may be such a rover that he couldn't bring her up good as Cousin Jont did his girl. Anyway, it means we've only got to use one spare room, and that's a blessing. For to air and clean two would be more'n I could manage just now. Lands, there's the train coming in!"

The two girls took the hint and left her to her task, calling back offers to help in any way they could, and promising to come and call on the captain the first possible moment they should be welcome.

"Aren't lots of things happening, Jinny-pinny?" said Beth Anne, skipping along happily. "I'm sorry Bess is away so long. New people are so thrilly, aren't they? I just love to see strange people and hear them talk about where they came from. It's like story books, and ——"

"There's the stage," cried Jinny, and Beth Anne, at the sight of the square topped vehicle at a standstill beside the hay-scales at the store, gave a squeak of interest.

Cale was carrying the mail-bags into the store, but there was no sea captain getting out of the closely curtained stage.

"He hasn't come," exclaimed Beth Anne in disgust. "How mean!"

As she spoke a head with a cloth cap, and a very ruddy face with gray whiskers under the fat folds of the chin, was thrust out between the curtains, and a lusty voice bawled:

"Hi, there! Lend a hand, mate. I can't get her out one-handed. Step lively, will you?"

Beth Anne pinched Jinny's arm black and blue in surprise.

"It must be him," whispered Jinny, forgetting her grammar. "Who's with him, I wonder?"

"His wife, I guess," ventured Beth Anne, as the captain, impatient at Cale's delay, roared again:

"Belay there! Stir yourself, will you?"

"He's not very polite," began Beth Anne, when Cale, hurrying out of the store, climbed

into the front seat and stretched far back into the dark recesses of the stage, pushing vigorously. The captain, emerging entirely on the side steps, did his part with equal energy.

"She must be sick," whispered Jinny, sympathetically. "Isn't it too bad? Poor Miss Carrie!"

"Maybe she's paralyzed," suggested Beth Anne, enjoying the added thrill of mystery.

"Cut it out! Cut it out!" screamed a voice from the inner darkness. "I'm a lady. I'm a lady!"

"Oh-h-h," breathed Beth Anne and Jinny in one gasp of dismay.

"Get a grip on her, will you?" urged Captain Dan'l to Cale. "I'm so blamed stiff in my j'ints, I can't bring her out."

The two girls fairly trembled with excitement. "She must be a terrible old lady," whispered Beth Anne. "What a dreadful voice she has."

Another shriek punctured the air.

"I'm an American. Touch me if you

dare," the harsh voice cried. "I'm a lady. I'm a lady. Ha-ha-ha!"

"She's crazy," said Jinny awestruck. "Oh, Beth Anne, isn't it too dreadful?"

Beth Anne nodded with her eyes glued on the door whence the mysterious old lady should emerge.

Cale gave a mighty push, Captain Daniel stepped back on the ground and in his arms was the largest cage Beth Anne had ever seen, and in the cage was the reddest, greenest, noisiest parrot that ever came out of the tropics.

"There she is, all steady, mate," said the captain, amiable enough now. "She's a pesky bird, and a heap of trouble to tote about, but she's blamed good company when she likes."

Beth Anne and Jinny had almost collapsed at the sight of the big bird, but in a twinkling Beth Anne recovered herself enough to whisper excitedly:

"Let's run and tell Miss Carrie he's coming, so she'll be ready for him."

Off they darted to the house in the back road where the porch had been magically cleared of its litter and the ferns and begonias were flourishing in their red and yellow pots in a neat row.

"Oh, Miss Carrie!" cried Beth Anne, catching sight of the helmet dust-cap in the pump shed. "He's come! Cap'n Dan'l's come!"

"Lands sakes!" cried Miss Carrie, excited in her turn. "Where's Angeline? My goodness me!" and she flew into the kitchen, where the placid Angeline could be seen, stirring batter for the hot cakes.

Miss Carrie bore down on her and swooped her off to some unseen spot, with the spoon still in her hand dripping batter as she went.

"Let's stay and see how they like the parrot," prompted Beth Anne. "We can show him the house, for I guess he's forgotten all about it after years and years and years."

Jinny hesitated. "Do you think she'd mind?" she asked doubtfully.

"Of course not," replied Beth Anne posi-

tively. "And it'll be such fun to see the parrot. We'll go meet him at the gate."

"All right," agreed Jinny, glad to be reassured. "Here he comes now."

"The cage is all covered up," said Beth Anne in disappointment. "Oh, I hope he doesn't keep it on all the time."

"Hush," cautioned Jinny. "Here he is."

Beth Anne swung the gate wide with a flourish.

"This is Miss Carrie's house," she said pleasantly, feeling quite like the mistress of some important ceremony.

Cap'n Dan'l stopped and stared up at the house as though doubtful of her statement; then he stepped briskly inside, muttering as he snapped the gate behind him something that Jinny understood as "plaguy children under foot," but which Beth Anne mistook for thanks.

"You're quite welcome, I am sure," she responded graciously. "I hope the parrot isn't sick, that she has to be covered up?"

"She's sufferin' from a mighty common complaint,—gabble-itus," said the captain with a suppressed smile. "That's why I muffle her, you see. Do you belong here?"

Beth Anne was taken aback by this question. "Oh, no, I live at Gable End," she replied very mildly. "I'm just a friend of Miss Carrie's."

She thought he looked relieved, but there was no time for further talk.

The front door had opened and Miss Carrie, in her second best gray with a little frilled apron, was on the porch, with Angeline, in similar semi-festive array, close at her elbow.

"Criminese! Who's that?" cried Captain Daniel in genuine astonishment.

Cap'n Dan'l dropped the cage. This relative of old Angeline's who had shared her home with his deaf cousin in the long years of his absence from the village should have been, according to his notion of her, old and withered like Angeline, and he was determined not to accept her without a protest.

"That ain't her?" he motioned to Miss Carrie, who, in spite of her elderly precise dress, looked surprisingly trim and active in the pale gray frock and frilly apron.

He shook off their assurances, becoming greatly confused.

"I didn't look for no young woman," he protested. "Why ain't she old? Why ain't she gray and deef, like she ought to be? Why ain't she ——"

Here Miss Carrie herself, coming down the steps with outstretched hand, cut him short.

"Why, Cap'n Dan'l, I'm real pleased to meet you," she said with a pleased flutter in her precise tones. "Here's Angeline, deaf as ever, but tickled to death to see you again."

And as Angeline held out a plump wrinkled hand, there was nothing else for Captain Daniel to do but shake it, and murmur some broken sentences about her looking younger than ever. Angeline could not hear a word,

of course, but she seemed mightily pleased and laughed her little laugh so heartily that the captain began to relax.

"Guess you're some s'prised to see me alive and hearty after all these years,—same as I am you," she smiled. "And here's Carrie, who you been a-writin' to. Guess you don't need no introduction to her."

He looked doubtfully at the narrow brown hand which was once more held out to him, took it gingerly, gave it a quick pump and dropped it like a hot potato.

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," he said, looking anything but happy, and beginning a retreat toward the gate.

Beth Anne and Jinny, with the shrouded cage immediately behind them where the captain had dropped it near the gate, blocked the narrow strip of concrete walk, and the gallant seaman was brought to a stand before he barely began to escape.

Miss Carrie, who noticed nothing, was cordiality itself.

"Bring your things right in, Cap'n Dan'l," she urged. "Your room's ready and waiting, and dinner'll soon be ready, too."

"Oh, dry up!" screeched the harsh voice that Beth Anne had been so eager to hear. "Go to thunder! Cut it out! Beat it! *Scat!*"

Miss Carrie started violently and looked hard at the captain to make sure she had heard.

"Sir," she demanded, with angry dignity, "are you addressing me?"

The captain looked first bewildered and then irritated. He did not understand, and his quick temper rose. His face flushed.

"I ain't said nothing any gentleman mightn't say to any lady, have I, ma'am?" he asked in some confusion, his face redder, and his gray whiskers more wiry than ever as he faced her.

"She's a pippin!" screamed the parrot, with unearthly clearness. "She's a peach. Oh, my!"

Miss Carrie's angry eyes went past the captain's burly form, past the two girls, and lighted on the muffled cage. Some dim memory of eastern tales of ladies who traveled in wicker panniers must have crossed her mind, for she drew herself up still more haughtily.

"If the person in that there compartment is your wife, Cap'n Dan'l, I can't say anything, but if she ain't, I'll trouble her to keep a civil tongue in her head," and she glared at the captain, the offending cage and at the whole creation with scornful dignity.

Beth Anne snickered nervously, Jinny caught her breath, and Angeline puckered her brow, but the captain's face grew stern.

"Wife, did you say, ma'am?" he asked with chill distinctness. "Of course, ma'am. To be sure, ma'am. Let me introduce you, ma'am," and he whisked off the cover, revealing the red and green parrot trundling sideways on its perch cocking its wicked eye at Miss Carrie, crying:

"LET ME INTRODUCE YOU, MA'AM"

"I'm a lady. I'm a lady. Touch me if you dare. Ha-ha-ha!"

Miss Carrie stared amazed at the brilliant saucy thing with the clear strident tones ringing in her ears, and had nothing more to the point to say than:

"Lands sakes alive! Oh, my gracious me! a parrot!"

"Yes, ma'am, a parrot. An' very good company, too," the captain challenged.

"For them as prefers birds to humans," Miss Carrie snapped back at him.

The captain started to reply, but no words came. His self-esteem had been deeply wounded, and he could not make allowances for Miss Carrie's surprise. Rapidly replacing the cover and picking up the cage he turned on his heel.

"I'm sorry to have troubled you, ma'am, by callin' at this hour of day. I hope I ain't disturbed Cousin Angeline. If you'll kindly tell her so, I'll be obliged. Any further communications addressed to me at the General

Washington will find me. I wish you a very good-morning," and with a stiff nautical salute, he faced about and marched for the gate.

"Lands sakes, where's he goin'?" asked Angeline in her queer little voice.

Miss Carrie melted at once. "Oh, Cap'n Dan'l, you ain't a-going to the ho-tel, with your place all set and ready?" she asked in as friendly a tone as she could call up on short notice. "Angeline'll never forgive you if you don't stop here."

Captain Daniel stared at the word "forgive."

"It ain't Angeline that's to do the forgivin'," he said with chilly dignity. "I've been spoke to in a way I'll stand from no female alive. To the General Washington I'll go, aye, and stay there, too, till you, ma'am, apologize for them words."

It was Miss Carrie's turn to grow red. Motioning to the bewildered Angeline that she would explain later, she addressed the captain

in such tones of sincerity that Beth Anne, who knew her well, felt her hopes of making friends with the precious parrot fade and die.

"I ain't much used to eatin' humble pie,—particularly to a man, and it's late in life for me to start," she said severely. "If you ever choose to come back, you're welcome, but if you're set on an apology I'm free to tell you it'll be quite a spell before you get any from me."

"I'll wait. I'll wait, ma'am," promised the captain. "The General Washington's good enough for me until you see your way clear to favor me. I'm lookin' to spend my last days here, so take your time, ma'am, take your time, but remember, obstinacy is mighty unbecomin' in a woman."

With this parting shot he got himself out of the gate and into the road with such expedition that no retort was possible.

Beth Anne and Jinny had faded into the background of the maple-bordered roadway, and now they fairly flew before the fear of

being overtaken by the captain, who was pegging along at a great rate.

"Isn't it awful?" giggled Beth Anne. "I didn't dream Miss Carrie could be so cross. Do you believe they'll ever be friends?"

Jinny shook her head as she glanced back over her shoulder.

"He looks like a sticker once he makes up his mind," she confessed doubtfully. "But you can't tell,—people are queer. They don't do what you expect them to."

Beth Anne agreed with her in this sentiment when they came out of the store with the mail and caught sight of the captain on the porch of the old tavern opposite. He was seated in a large rocker, smoking a short pipe and reading the paper as though he had always lived there. The red and green parrot trundled and sidled in her cage above his head, and he looked the picture of calm content.

"Maybe he'll make up with them soon," said Beth Anne hopefully. "I wish he

would, for I'd love to hear some of those sea stories."

Jinny started to reply, when her eyes traveled up the road and she stopped in surprise.

"There's the Van Meter house open again," she said eagerly. "They must be working on it. And, oh, Beth Anne! there's a machine on the drive and a girl in the summer-house."

CHAPTER V

A MORNING CALL

THE strange little girl was sitting in the summer-house very quietly indeed, and she did not even turn her head as Beth Anne and Jinny came along the sidewalk by Stepping Stones, although the summer-house was so near to the road that she must have heard their footsteps crunching on the cinders of the path.

"I'm going to speak," said Beth Anne in an undertone. "We'll have to know her anyway, if she's going to live here."

She stopped and pushed aside the branching hedge and called out in her pleasantest voice, "Good-morning! Isn't it a lovely day?"

The drooping figure in the shadow of the summer-house raised itself ever so slightly and turned its head to stare at them.

They saw a pale lifeless face with dark indifferent eyes and a thin mouth which seemed as though it seldom took the trouble to smile. And Beth Anne experienced a feeling of keen disappointment. If this girl really proved to be as spiritless as she seemed on first sight she would not be much of an addition to their circle. Beth Anne was of a hopeful nature, however, and so she spoke again, trying to think that the girl had not heard her greeting.

"Good-morning. May we come in and see you? We live in the next place down there," and she waved a hand toward Gable End which showed its chimneys through the tree-tops.

The girl drew her furs closer, shivering as though there were no sunshine or warmth in the air.

"Thank you very much," she replied in a prim, composed fashion. "You may come in if you wish."

Beth Anne and Jinny both felt very much dashed by this cool reception, but they rallied

themselves and tried to look as cheerful as they could in spite of the lack of cordiality in the newcomer.

"She must be ill," said Beth Anne, trying to make the best of it, as they went swiftly around by way of the front entrance. "With all those furs and that lovely velvet coat, she positively and actually looks half frozen."

"Perhaps that's why they are coming out to the country so early," suggested Jinny, whose sympathy was easily roused. "Poor thing, I don't wonder she isn't very cheerful."

This explanation of the chilling conduct of the new girl so appealed to their tenderness that they quite forgave her unsociability and were ready to make allowances for any sort of behavior she might indulge in.

They were, however, not quite prepared for what really did happen. As they reached the summer-house the girl rose ceremoniously and curtesied with a very frigid civility. She did not look at all ill, and seemed to be indifferent rather than weak or ailing.

"It is very kind of you to come," she said in a thin, precise tone, holding out a well-gloved hand to each in turn. "We are not going to move in until the house is entirely renovated, and I am only waiting for my father to inspect the repairs."

The air with which this little speech was delivered somehow conveyed the impression that the friendly call was untimely and not very welcome. The pale girl was evidently too well trained to show any discourtesy to strangers but both Beth Anne and Jinny heartily wished they had suppressed their social impulses until the Van Meters were duly installed in Stepping Stones and were in a mood to receive the advances of the neighborhood.

Beth Anne for once could think of nothing to say, and Jinny broke the moment of strained silence.

"We are so glad you are coming to live here," she said brightly. "It has been ever so long since the Doanes left. Marjorie was

a great chum of ours once, and she was just about your age."

Jinny had not intended putting out any claims for the society of the newcomer. She was only talking for the sake of saying something. The young Miss Van Meter seemed to discern a purpose in her words, and to shrink from the prospect of future intimacy.

"I shall have no friends out here, I fancy," she said with her cool glance resting on each in turn. "I expect to have a great many visitors from town. Of course, I shall be pleased to know whoever my father wishes me to know."

Beth Anne felt they were being politely but firmly put aside for future inspection, and her temper began to rise. She was not used to being snubbed and the sensation was not pleasant. She wished she could say just what she thought about snippity, stuck-up people, but instead of giving way to her feelings she choked down her irritation and said as calmly as she could:

"I hope you'll like Stepping Stones, and will enjoy the country. We have to go now, or we shall be late for our practising."

Jinny added, in a very level tone and with her head held high, "We are glad to have met you, Miss Van Meter. Good-bye," and she walked off with so much dignity that Beth Anne suddenly wanted to giggle, and her resentment faded as swiftly as it had risen.

"Good-bye," she said in a warm cheerful tone, holding out her hand. "Come and see us some time. The meadow-path is the shortest way."

"Thank you so much," responded the girl, allowing her limp hand to droop into Beth Anne's firm one for the fraction of a second. "I am not accustomed to meadows. I should prefer the sidewalk."

Beth Anne raced after Jinny with her mind in a whirl of tangled sensations. Disappointment, impatience, and a desire to laugh struggled with each other, and under

all there was a stir of mind that was not at all unpleasant.

Jinny turned to her as she caught up and her pretty face was flushed. "Isn't she a stupid?" she said disdainfully. "She's more like wax-works than any one I ever saw."

Beth Anne fairly laughed out loud at this uprising on the part of the even-tempered Jinny.

"Why, Jinny-pinny, you're all stirred up, aren't you?" she said, slipping her hand into her friend's arm. "I think it's sort of funny,—the way she acted like a mechanical toy."

"She's a tiresome creature," said Jinny decisively. "If she'd been a real girl, instead of a paper one, she'd have been exploring all over the place. The way she sat cooped up in that summer-house like a dormouse showed just what she was."

Beth Anne giggled and her eyes began to shine. The coolness which the newcomer had shown to their advances had stirred

her mind to a keener point and she could see a whole series of intensely interesting events that might follow on the heels of this chilling introduction to the small Miss Van Meter.

"Oh, well. She may feel better when they really-for-truly come to live here," she said comfortably, skipping a little on the flagstones of their own sidewalk. "Wait till you see how she likes us then."

"I don't believe I'll ever like her," said Jinny with a troubled look. "I feel now as if I wanted to shake her. She's a regular goose, Beth Anne dear, and I don't believe she'll ever be nice to us."

Beth Anne reached over and patted Jinny's hand. "I didn't mind her being horrid to me,—really-for-truly I didn't. It was sort of like a play to me. If you feel so cross why don't you write her a letter?"

"Write her a letter?" echoed Jinny in surprise. "What for? I don't even know her name."

Beth Anne smiled her superior smile, and her head wagged. "Not a regular put-in-the-mail letter, of course," she said mysteriously. "Just a letter to relieve your feelings, you know."

"What do you mean?" inquired Jinny, all in the dark.

Then Beth Anne's curly head wagged more than ever. "It's the way I do lately," she said, importantly. "Nowadays when I get awfully fired up I come up here to the schoolroom and I write a letter to the person I'm cross with. I put all the prickly things I'd like to say into it, and I make it good and strong, I can tell you."

"Oh, Beth Anne, you never in the world——!" said Jinny, rather shocked and yet fascinated.

"Uh-huh, yes, I do, too," declared Beth Anne proudly. "I write pages and pages of it. And then,—what do you suppose I do with it?"

"Put the stamp on and mail it," hazarded

Jinny, feeling vaguely this was not the right answer.

"Not a bit of it," cried Beth Anne, jubilantly. "I put it in the secret drawer and I lock it and I let it stay there for days and days. And if I get sizzling at that person again I think to myself, 'Oh, if you only knew what I said to you in my letter! It's twice as bad as you're saying to me now.' It's a perfectly lovely way," she ended happily.

"But," protested Jinny with a troubled brow, "that doesn't seem just right, somehow ——"

Beth Anne cut her short with a sniff. "I heard Mrs. Oliver tell Mrs. Drake that's the way a friend of hers did. Wrote letters, and then the next day, when she was ashamed of herself, she burnt them."

"Oh, that's different," cried Jinny, relieved. "She didn't feel glad she'd written them, as you do. Don't you see?"

"Not a scrap of difference," returned Beth Anne firmly. "You don't always understand

things, Jinny dear, even if you are 'most a year older and so terribly clever, too. It soothes me to glue my lips together when Ben or Francie tease me and to think how mad they'd be if they knew what I had written down and poked away in that secret drawer."

Jinny was unconvinced, though she could find no words to make her view of the matter clear, so she only said, after a little silence and in her usual tone:

"Well, we'll put Miss Wax-works on the shelf till she shows she'd like to know us. We haven't any more time to waste on her. We have to get that practising done, and then Mary promised to help with the cushions for the Gym. Hurry up, Beth Anne. You take the letters in and I'll get the music ready."

Beth Anne seized the mail and began to fling off her hat and coat before they were fairly in the house. All the visions of future incidents at Stepping Stones gave instant place to the thrilling interest of the wonderful Gym.

She raced off up-stairs in search of Mary Stone and she gave a squeal of delight as she stumbled over a huge bundle in the upper hall.

"Do 'phone over to Francie that we have the curtains," she cried. "Mary's had the whole lot of studio stuff brought down for us, and there are hoards and lots of hangings and stuff in the bundle!"

CHAPTER VI

BETH ANNE PARADES

"GEORGE says Major is awfully frisky," said Beth Anne to Jinny a few days later as they were hurrying into their afternoon clothes.

Bess was still away with her Aunt Molly enjoying the delights of Boston, and the work on the Gym was delayed on account of the unexpected stickiness of the floor paint. It seemed that Francie had mixed the wrong ingredients when the boys were experimenting, and although the floor looked very satisfactory it simply would not dry. They had been comforted by the opinion of experts that it was only a matter of time, however, and so the intimate five had postponed further work on the Gym and also had deferred all meetings of the G. S. C. until either Bess should return or the floor be fit to walk on. Beth

Anne and Jinny had almost forgotten their encounter with the small Van Meter girl, and although the repairs and additions were in full swing at Stepping Stones they had little interest in that property, another topic having claimed their attention for at least one whole day.

"I'm glad Mary is a suffragist, aren't you?" said Jinny, tying the broad yellow satin ribbons that were so becoming to her dark hair. "It's going to be such fun to go over to the Newton parade."

Beth Anne was rummaging madly for a fresh handkerchief, but she responded heartily.

"Fun! I should think so!" she cried with a wag of her curls. "To go parading along with those yellow banners streaming and the bands tootling out the 'Star Spangled Banner' and the people cheering like mad! Oh, I do believe I'll be a regular votes-for-women military suffragette after this!"

"You mean 'militant,'" corrected Jinny, pinning on her hat carefully. "And that

means smashing and tearing, just like a bad, bad child, to get your own way. Your mother would never let you do that, Beth Anne Burton."

Beth Anne subsided with a sigh. "No," she said pensively. "Mother doesn't like women to talk too much, either. I wonder if she'll like my going to a parade ——"

"With Mary?" cried Jinny good-naturedly. "Of course she wouldn't mind our going with her. You know that Mary is as sweet and gentle as anybody can be. She wouldn't take us anywhere we oughtn't to go. Besides, we are only going to look on. We'll be among the supporters, Mary says ——"

A clear call from below broke in on Jinny's defense. Seizing their gloves and furs they sped down the broad stairs to find the hall empty and the front door wide open.

Mary in her pretty black garments was already in the little basket phaeton, and her attention was fully absorbed with the frisky Major, so that for the first mile or so neither

Beth Anne nor Jinny ventured to disturb her with questions. When, however, they had passed the woods at Centre Valley and Major seemed reduced again to his normal reliable self they plied her with queries about their position in the parade, how many people would be there and whether they would go with the procession the entire length of the Newton streets.

Mary laughed at their eagerness and told them they were only to go into the rear band of supporters and to circle once around the old square, and then were to drop quietly out and finish the afternoon with a call on some Newton friends who were not interested in suffrage and would therefore be pretty certain to be at home.

Beth Anne's cheeks grew pinker with the excitement as Mary, after a glance at her watch, let Major into his briskest gait, and the miles fairly flew under them until they drew up in the big central square at Newton where the parade was already almost formed.

The crowd, as was usual in the demonstrations in the country towns, was dense and the throng of automobiles and carriages from the town and surrounding country was far greater than Mary had expected; but she slowed Major down to a sedate trot and they passed quietly through the spectators and took their place in line at the extreme end of the procession.

The committee in white linen with yellow sashes across their breasts were riding up and down the line, trying to keep such perfect order as the men sprinkled through the crowd at the curb should approve. Beth Anne was delighted with their spotless suits and prancing horses, but Jinny liked the companies of infantry better.

"They look more natural all together like that," she exclaimed. "Those marshals look funny with their squeaky voices and their sashes. Why, you can't hear a word they say —— Oh, look at that machine! Isn't it a beauty!"

The big yellow car swept past them to

reach the front line of automobiles, and Beth Anne gasped with astonishment, for in the midst of the flowers and ribbons and banners sat Mrs. Horner, an old friend of her mother's, and beside Mrs. Horner in a pretty pale yellow serge coat and wide hat was the small Van Meter girl.

"Oh, look, Mary!" cried Beth Anne, catching at Mary's arm with a vigor that shook the taut lines and made the skittish Major start and quiver.

Bang! went the band out in front.

Squawk! went the fife and drum corps beside them.

Toot-toot! went an hundred whistles.

The procession was off!

But Major did not wait for any of them. Like a bolt from the blue he made one mighty plunge out of the line and away from the garlanded, beflowered vehicles and, running clear of the crowd that melted before him, he fled from the maddening noises of the packed and turbulent square.

Beth Anne gave one scream at the first leap, which swung them out of the line. And then she clung to Jinny with both hands, and with her eyes wide and straining and her breath going fast she waited for the final crash that should finish the business.

"I wish I'd never been a suffragist," she whispered to herself through her set teeth. "I hate parades. I hate —— Oh, Mary, stop him! Stop him! He's going to kill us *dead!*"

But Major, by some miracle, did nothing of the sort.

Having cleared the crowd in the square and skirted the wheels of the obstructing vehicles, he turned into Main Street without crashing into anything or overturning the phaeton, and although he tore steadily on in great leaps and bounds he let himself be slightly guided by Mary's firm hand on the reins.

As they left the streets of the little town Mary cast an anxious glance ahead.

"There's Carr's hill just ahead," she told the girls through her white lips. "He'll stop there, or I'll have to throw him."

Beth Anne, with that quick vision of hers, knew the reason. For if the galloping horse did not slacken on the steep ascent, he would have a long mile of rough down-hill road before him with the sharp turn at the stone bridge at the bottom of the grade.

Jinny also knew the danger that lay over the brow of the hill, and when they flew up the first incline without lessening speed, she put her lips to Beth Anne's forehead and kissed her softly. Beth Anne began to cry a little under her breath. Mary's lips grew whiter and more firm.

Major skimmed on. They were half-way up the hill.

"Hold tight now, for your lives," commanded Mary. "And jump if I tell you."

She braced herself for the effort, took a stronger hold on the lines and then gave a little cry of relief. Major, at the last thank-

you-ma'am, slackened, loped more slowly still, and dropped into a fidgety walk.

They had reached the top of the hill and were safe.

Mary stopped him under the shadow of a big tree, and motioned to the girls to get out.

"He's all right now," she said quietly. "We'll take a little rest and then we'll feel more like enjoying the drive home."

"Enjoying it!" cried Beth Anne, with the taste of danger still bitter on her lips. "I won't ride behind that flying-machine again. He's as wild as a tiger ——"

"Nonsense, dear," said Mary, gently, getting out and going to the horse's head. "He's as frightened as you are. Poor old boy, see how he is trembling. It was the noise, and your jerking the lines that made him bolt. He's as quiet as can be and dreadfully sorry, too."

Beth Anne sniffed as Mary patted the quivering nose and stroked the dripping

neck. "He's a scary thing," she protested. "And I don't like him a bit."

"He brought us through all those wagons and cars splendidly, anyway," said Jinny, growing assured by Mary's quiet words. "Can't we tie him to the fence and undo his check-rein, so he can get a little rest? That'll make him feel better, too."

Mary nodded, and Jinny got the hitching strap from under the seat. She had made the knot secure when a cry from Beth Anne made her turn just in time to see Mary collapse limply on the grass beside the horse, with her head almost under his strongly shod front feet.

She was too paralyzed to move or even cry out. She saw Beth Anne leap and drag the limp figure into safety, and then tumble in a heap herself, with one foot waving high in the air and squeals of pain issuing from her open mouth.

Jinny flew to her side, all sorts of wild fears racing through her mind.

"Oh, Beth Anne, what's the matter?" she cried in an agony of fright, glancing from Beth Anne to Mary, who lay white and still, but safe. "Are you awfully hurt, or what is it?"

"I guess I'm all broken to pieces," lamented Beth Anne, sitting up as best she could for her injured leg. "I ran to pull Mary out of the way of Major's heels and I trod in a hole, and I'm all twisted up."

"You're alive, anyway," said Jinny thankfully. "I was so scared the first minute for fear you'd died of shock."

"Pooh, I'm not that sort," said Beth Anne, gasping with pain. "You'd better see about Mary. She's fainted, I guess."

Jinny bent over Mary, and she was much relieved to see that her eyes were open and a tiny reassuring smile was beginning to shine on her pale lips. "Shall I get a doctor?" she asked eagerly, for she was not versed in fainting spells, and feared they might be fatal if neglected.

Mary smiled in earnest at that, and made Jinny help her into a sitting position with her back against the tree trunk. "I'll be all right now in a minute or two," she assured her. "I used to faint like this when anything startled me, though I haven't done it for a long time."

She looked anxiously at Beth Anne, who was trying to keep her face from twisting into grimaces of pain. "What is the matter?" she asked in surprise.

Beth Anne gave a dismal sniff. "I've broken my 'leg, I guess," she said, dolefully. "It's stinging like everything and oh, how it hurts!"

"Oh, no!" cried Mary compassionately, forgetting herself in this disaster. "Let me see it, dear. It isn't broken, I hope!"

Beth Anne bore the pain of having her ankle handled and felt quite proud of herself when Mary ended with a word of praise for her self-control.

"It isn't broken," she said. "But it seems

to be badly sprained. Jinny must stay here with you while I go to the nearest house and telephone for the doctor."

Jinny hesitated as Mary, with her hands still trembling from her own fainting spell, untied the strap from the fence.

"L-Let me go," she urged. "I can drive, and maybe you could do something for Beth Anne if it hurt her dreadfully ——"

"Oh, don't let her, Mary," cried Beth Anne in alarm. "She doesn't know how to drive half as well as I do, and I wouldn't take that dreadful horse a step down that hill for anything."

Mary smiled at the healthy tone of resentment against Major in Beth Anne's voice.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," she promised, and the two girls watched her drive off with mingled feelings of relief and apprehension.

"I do hope she doesn't smash up," said Beth Anne, cuddling up against Jinny. "I

wouldn't have had you go for anything in the world, Jinny dear."

"Why, Beth Anne, you oughtn't to feel that way," said Jinny in mild reproof. "Mary's ever so much nicer than I am, and she's grown up, too."

"I know she is," agreed Beth Anne. "But I love you best,—though I love her a lot, too. You're my very dearest, next to Mother and Father. And besides, if Mary should be smashed up, she's lived years and years longer thán you have and seen lots of things you want to see. Niagara Falls, and—— Ouch! Oo-o-o, how it hurts!"

The phaeton jogged safely down the long hill and past the stone copings of the bridge, and then the road lay empty in the pleasant afternoon sunshine. It seemed a very long time till a gray runabout came whisking around the bridge end and began to climb the hill with its lamps winking in the sun like kind eyes blinking encouragement to them while the phaeton jogged on far behind.

It turned out that the ankle was not so badly sprained as Mary had feared, and after the rather painful business of bandaging was over and the doctor had instructed Mary as to the future needs of the patient, Beth Anne was lifted into the comfortable back seat of the basket phaeton and with a rather reluctant and quavering good-bye to the doctor, she started on her homeward way.

They went slowly, for Beth Anne could not get over her fear that the thoroughly subdued Major might bolt again, and it was nearly six o'clock when they reached the crossroads and saw the chimneys and shrubberies of Gable End.

Beth Anne's drooping spirits rose a little at that familiar sight, and she began to show some interest in life.

"There's Bess on the porch," said Jinny, turning on the front seat to smile at Beth Anne. "Won't she be surprised when she hears all that's happened!"

Beth Anne sat up, all her vim returning.

"She'll wish she'd been in a parade and a rescue and a sprained ankle!" she crowed, with her eyes beginning to snap. "I guess she'll be sorry she isn't a suffrage-parader!"

CHAPTER VII

THE ARRIVALS AT STEPPING STONES

THE return to Gable End and that first evening were the pleasantest hours that Beth Anne had for some time, for after the flash of interest in her character as invalid had passed, the restraint of keeping still and bearing the pain of her sprained ankle was very hard on her. She tried hard to be patient, but it was stupid work, sitting all day in the same place hour after hour.

"If it weren't for the G. S. C. I really-for-truly don't know how I'd live at all," she confided to Mary at the end of the first week. "They've just saved my life."

"Shall we apply for medals for them?" laughed Mary, who was arranging flowers in a big bowl. "No hero complete without a medal nowadays, you know."

But in spite of her teasing Mary was really very thankful to the club for its efforts to cheer Beth Anne's dull days. They came after school each day. Bess told her tales of her days in town, Francie played her favorite parchesi with her and Ben talked endlessly about the plans for the Gym meetings, while Jinny constituted herself a committee of one to report the progress of the improvements on the Van Meter place, and all of them were as jolly and companionable as any club could be.

But the best thing that happened to Beth Anne was the Van Meter moving. It took place in the second week of her shut-in time, and occupied three long days, and Beth Anne had the fun of seeing it all from her window by the big sycamore.

And then with the first real spring-like day came the family.

Jinny was in the schoolroom, fussing over the entries for the last meeting of the club when Beth Anne called in an excited voice:

"Here they come! In two big automo-

biles! There are packs and hoards of them!" she cried. "Hurry up and see!"

Jinny came flying to the window, and with the gauzy curtain screening them they watched the big dark green machines sweep up the curving drive and deposit their loads at the front door of Stepping Stones.

"There's our snippity girl and another one," said Beth Anne eagerly.

"And two nurses!" cried Jinny in astonishment. "How funny to have them for big girls like that!"

"They're regular French *bonnes*, too, with their capes and long ribbons on their caps," said Beth Anne, enjoying the spectacle immensely. "Those girls must be twins,—they're about a size, only they aren't dressed alike."

"There's a boy," announced Jinny. "And he has a man with him, too. He must be weak if he couldn't carry that little bag himself."

"They're a helpless lot, aren't they?" said

Beth Anne. "Two maids and a man for those three children. I don't wonder they look thin and limp."

"They haven't any mother," declared Jinny. "Unless she's coming later on. Mr. Van Meter is all by himself in the other machine, —no, there's a little lady, but she's old. She has gray hair. She can't be his wife."

Beth Anne's ready interest flared. "I tell you what she is," she said briskly. "She's his aunt, who keeps house. Mrs. Van Meter is ill and has to stay abroad for her health,— that's the way it is in books, and I believe these Van Meters are regular booky sort of people. Oh, if I were only well, I'd go and get acquainted right away. New people are such fun to talk to."

"The girl wasn't much fun," Jinny reminded her.

Beth Anne was not to be dashed. "The rest may be," she said brightly. "And I'd love to know real twins. I've never known any in my whole life."

"I tell you what I'll do for you, Beth Anne," said Jinny, puckering her smooth brow at the prospect. "I'll try to make friends with them, and Bess will, too, I am sure. Then we'll tell you all about them, so you won't feel so shut up and out of things."

Beth Anne gave her a rapturous squeeze.

"You're a duck, Jinny-pinny!" she cried, happily. "I'll just love to hear every scrap that you say. Tell Bess they've come, will you?"

Jinny flung on her sweater and raced with the news, while Beth Anne lay back in her big chair and watched the empty garden of the white house down the road, hoping that the first twin would bring the second one out to show her the summer-house or the garden, and so give her a chance to compare them again.

No one came out of the white house for a long while, and then it was only one of the nurses with a letter which she took to the

store. Just as Beth Anne's patience had failed, however, and she was about to turn to her library book, the front door opened and the boy came out, followed by the second twin.

They sauntered about the walks and explored the summer-house in a sedate fashion that was particularly disheartening to Beth Anne. She shook her bright head as she watched them, and when they ended by sitting down primly on the seats on the portico, she gave a contemptuous snort.

"Why, they aren't live meat people at all!" she cried in disappointed surprise. "They're nothing but niminy-piminy little chits,—that's what they are. Sitting down on the porch, when they've just come, and haven't seen the barns nor the wood-lot, nor the store nor anything!"

She waited for at least ten minutes, and then as the young Van Meters still sat placidly in their row on the portico, she turned to her book in deep disgust.

"I'll never really want to know them," she said firmly. "They're too deadly dull to be worth even looking at."

When Jinny and Bess came an hour later she was still so intent on her book that she never heard them till they were at the very threshold of her room.

"They aren't twins at all," called Jinny and Bess together. "We heard one of the maids talking to Hannah Witmer."

"Not twins?" cried Beth Anne in deeper disappointment than she had felt before. "Why, then there isn't anything worth while about them. They're a poky lot. I've been watching them, and they are perfectly sickening. Niminy-piminy all the way through. They're not really-for-truly folks at all."

"Oh, maybe they won't be so bad," said Bess, pacifically. "They're pretty white and thin, but maybe they'll get better out here in the country. Their mother is ill, too."

"She's in a sanitarium in New England,"

supplemented Jinny, pulling off her sweater and going to the desk. "I guess they're all sort of delicate. The doctor went in just now. See, he's still there."

Beth Anne craned her neck. There was the gray runabout, sure enough.

"Pooh! I guess they're a lot of babies that fuss over themselves," she said contemptuously. "I'm not going to have a thing to do with them. They're too tame for me,—sitting like a row of images on the porch like that!"

"You'll get over that, Beth Anne," said Bess, cheerily. "They may turn out better than they seem."

Jinny gave a start. "Oh, I forgot your letter," she said, diving into the sweater pocket. "It came in the three o'clock mail."

Beth Anne took the small envelope with quickened interest. "I don't remember any writing like that," she said, tearing it open eagerly.

She ran her eyes down the few lines,

scanned the signature and gave an exclamation of surprise.

"It's from Mrs. Horner," she said. "She wants me to go see the Van Meter girl. She saw us in the suffrage parade, she says, and Geraldine Van Meter,—that must be the girl's name,—said they were going to move next door to us. She says she's 'a very agreeable little girl, and should prove a pleasant companion.' What do you think of that?" she ended in wide-eyed astonishment.

Bess and Jinny smiled at each other at her altered tone. "You'll simply have to go," said Bess decisively. "You know your mother would want you to."

"She must be better than she seems," agreed Jinny readily, "or Mrs. Horner wouldn't like her."

"But I can't go for a whole week or more," protested Beth Anne, all her determination to snub the Van Meters forgotten and her whole mind set on graceful obedience to the little friendly note. It was so rare an honor,—this

getting a formal letter from a grown-up acquaintance,—that she responded to its dictates with all her warm impulsive heart.

"We might go for you," suggested Bess, briskly, afraid to let this favorable mood pass. "We could call and tell her about your being laid up and ask her to come and see you."

"The very thing!" cried Jinny gaily. "Here comes Mary. Let's ask her about it."

Mary flung aside her scarf as she came in. "What a day it is," she said brightly. "It is getting positively warm. I think we'll have to take you down to the sun-parlor to-morrow, Beth Anne."

"Oh, please do!" cried Beth Anne, with her eyes dancing, "then I can show Geraldine Van Meter all the photographs that Mother sent home last week,—they're in the portfolio there, and ——"

"Geraldine Van Meter?" asked Mary in surprise. "How did you come to know her or her name?"

The letter was produced, and Mary read it.

"Of course, you'll have to be nice to them," she said at once, and Bess and Jinny shot an understanding look at each other. "Poor little things, they'll be lonely enough, no doubt, in a strange place and without their mother."

"Bess and Jinny are going to see her and tell her I'm laid up, and ask her to come over here to see me," said Beth Anne. "Ought we to ask them all, Mary, or are two of them enough?"

Mary thought a moment before she replied. "You might have a very quiet little party in the sun-parlor to-morrow afternoon," she said brightly. "Francie and Ben and Bess would help them feel at home, I'm sure, and if they both came, there would be less danger of their feeling strange and shy."

Beth Anne almost bounced out of her nest of cushions. "How gorgeoliferous!" she cried. "That will be the very thing. Mary dear, you are perfectly splendid to make up such a lovely deed."

Mary laughed easily. "I'll write a little

note to the person who has them in charge," she said, "and then I'll 'phone to them. They might think us a little sudden if we stormed them without warning. Bess and Jinny can take the note over in the morning, and meanwhile, I'll try to find out whom I am to besiege."

Mary went off to her room to put away her wraps, and the three girls were left together in a high state of excited planning.

"We'll ask Francie and Ben as I go home," said Bess, "and after we have been to see them to-morrow morning, we'll make up the games for the party. It isn't worth while planning too much till we know what sort of thing they like."

Beth Anne nodded. "I've lots of ideas sizzling in my head already," she said proudly. "I know we're going to have a magnificently splendid time."

"We'll have to have quiet games," warned Jinny. "You can't bounce about now like the rest of us."

Beth Anne smiled beatifically. "Don't be afraid, Jinny dearest," she said in her loftiest tone. "I'm thinking of the sweetest lady-like-est things you ever dreamed of. And," she said with a flash of a different spirit, "if Ben and Francie don't like them, they can go home! They'll miss the ice-cream and cake if they do, and serve them right, too!"

It proved, on Mary Stone's investigation, that Mr. Van Meter had returned at once to town, leaving an elderly cousin, a dainty spinster lady, in charge at Stepping Stones, and Miss Simpkins' reply to Mary's note was so polite and cordial that the little party seemed assured of success. Mrs. Horner had written with good effect to both the Van Meters and Beth Anne, and it was evident that the powers had agreed the children should be friends.

The next day was as perfect as any one could wish, and Bess arrived half an hour before the appointed time.

"There now, we're all ready for them," said

Beth Anne complacently. "It's three o'clock, too. They'll soon be here."

"Everything looks lovely," said Bess, with a glance around the sunny room.

Jinny was very quiet, and her eyes had a disturbed expression. The memory of the call made that morning on the Van Meters had not prepared her to look for much real pleasure in the afternoon's party, but she kept her fears to herself, since Bess did not seem to share them.

"Of course," went on Bess, "they're sort of weak and quiet looking, but what can you expect? They've never skated nor played tennis nor waded nor been on a picnic nor anything. I guess the Grow Straight Club will make them open their eyes. Let's ask them to our first real meeting and see how they take it."

Beth Anne and Jinny agreed joyfully. "But we'll have to ask the boys, of course," added Jinny.

The three girls were in the pleasant sun-

parlor. Beth Anne was in the long cane chair amidst a litter of gay cushions. The pink bow on her bright curls was matched by the eager flush on her round cheeks, and her eyes were shining like clear sapphires. Bess in her violet-striped lawn from last summer and with fresh violet ribbons for necktie and sash looked as festive as she felt,—which was saying a great deal; while Jinny, with her yellow gown and the same yellow ribbons which had figured in the suffrage parade, was idling over the table where the games and puzzles were.

Mary came in with a long pasteboard box in her hands. "Here is something for you, Beth Anne," she said. "The Van Meter man just left it."

Beth Anne gave a squeal of delight when she opened the long green box and undid the sheaths of green tissue paper. The long-stemmed pink roses lay dewy and fragrant amid a bower of fern and forget-me-nots.

"Oh, how splendiferous!" she cried. "And

here's a card in the cute little envelope." She pulled it out eagerly and read with genuine astonishment, "'Miss Geraldine Van Meter!' Oh, my goodness me!"

The first moment of surprise was followed by a wave of something very like disquiet. Beth Anne lifted a rather troubled face from the dewy fragrance, and said half aloud, "If she sends such perfectly gorgeous flowers she must think it's a real, top-lofty party. Oh, I wish she understood it was just a plain game-and-puzzle party!"

"We told her just what it was," chorused Bess and Jinny in quick denial. "We told her to wear her every-day clothes, too."

Mary tried to dispel this cloud. "No doubt she understood," she said mildly. "I think Miss Simpkins must have sent to town for the flowers, and the florist made up an elaborate box. They are lovely, anyway, and I am going to put them in the big bowl just as they are."

"There they come!" cried Bess, with a

glance down the road, seizing the wrappings and thrusting them into the waste basket. "Jinny, you get the water, and we'll have them all fixed by the time they get here."

"That's the comfort of having a long driveway," laughed Mary, arranging the flowers with deft fingers. "It takes so long to get into us in this tucked away sun-parlor that we simply can't be taken by surprise."

Jinny flew for the water and came back with Francie and Ben, each with a pitcher, so the flowers were placed and they were all ready to welcome the Van Meters by the time the little party of visitors came in sight again around the corner of the drive.

"Huh, it takes a man and two maids to herd them along," commented Ben with a grin. "Must be mighty precious children."

"Now, Ben, don't begin," said Jinny severely. "We're going to be as nice as we can, and show them what good times we have. So don't tease."

Ben opened his eyes. "Who's teasing?"

he asked innocently. "I only said they must be precious, and it looks like it, doesn't it?"

Ben was a newcomer himself, having been in Centreville only about a month, but he was of the sort that makes friends easily and he had already become one of the intimate five. Mr. Drake said he had been as good as a tonic for Francie, and even Jinny, who was apt to be critical of him, owned that since he had made his home with the Drakes Francie had changed vastly for the better, being now a normal, semi-civilized boy.

"He doesn't look as if he had any muscle, either," said Francie, with an air of an expert. "Cricky, what thin legs!"

"Hush, he'll hear you," cautioned Bess, subduing a giggle, as Mary returned, ushering in the two serious, pale-faced girls and the equally serious, pale-faced boy.

CHAPTER VIII

GETTING ACQUAINTED

MARY brought them straight to Beth Anne's chair.

"This is Geraldine, Beth Anne," she said pleasantly, introducing them in turn. "And this is Claire and this is Egbert. Beth Anne isn't able to come shake hands, so I'm afraid you will have to go to her," she added, as the three stood staring in a most disconcerting fashion at the occupant of the long chair.

Beth Anne felt suddenly very shy. The three pairs of grave eyes seemed to bore right into her. She held out her hand to the girl she had already met and said rather stumblingly: "I'm awfully glad to see you. It's very good of you to come."

Geraldine bobbed and said, "Pleased, I'm sure," and shook Beth Anne's hand limply.

Claire bobbed and said, "Glad to m-m-meet you," and then blushed and hid behind Geraldine.

Egbert bowed like a dancing master, shook hands like a diplomat, and said with a very clear parrot-like voice, "Charmed to make your acquaintance, Miss Burton."

"Gosh!" said Ben, in a thrilling whisper that could be heard distinctly, and Beth Anne, though it was the word of all Ben's forbidden words that she hated the most, couldn't help liking him for it.

Mary shot a controlling glance at the insurgent Ben, and went on with the ceremony of introduction in the simplest way possible, but the young Van Meters were evidently nothing if not thorough and they went through their bobbing and bowing and stiff speeches to each of the boys in turn.

"Now I shall have to run away and write tiresome letters," said Mary brightly, "but I shall be back after while," and with a gay

nod to them she went off, leaving them to their own devices.

Beth Anne's shyness came upon her again and she was very glad to have Ben take the lead, which he did in his wholesome good-natured way.

"Let's play a game of cards first, just to limber up," he proposed after a look at the table of games and puzzles. "Then we can start in on some guessing games. Gee, Beth Anne, you've got a lot of new ones, haven't you?"

Beth Anne's spirits rose. "Yes, indeed," she said, briskly. "Mary got a lot for me this morning, lovely new ones. I hope you'll like them," she turned to Geraldine who was sitting quietly near her.

Geraldine opened her eyes a little, but merely said in her cool slow fashion, "I don't know much about games. We haven't played any since we were very young."

Beth Anne could hear Ben give a low whistle and she hastened to say as gaily as

she could, "Then it'll be lots of fun to begin again, won't it? What sort of card games can you play?"

Geraldine looked slightly distressed. "I'm afraid we can't play cards at all," she said politely, and Claire blushed as though caught in a fault.

"Oh, that doesn't matter," said Bess. "We'll take some awfully easy game and we'll all play, so we can be sociable. What shall it be,—Casino or Old Maids?"

Jinny and Francie immediately spoke for Old Maids, as that was the simplest game ever played, and the table was moved up to Beth Anne's long chair at once.

Beth Anne took Egbert Van Meter as partner, Ben had Geraldine, and Claire fell to Bess's lot as Francie chose Jinny with a promptness that was noticeable.

The cards were dealt by Ben, who had drawn the first deal, and Beth Anne settled down to the foolish game feeling that they would begin to enjoy themselves at once.

She smiled at Egbert in the friendliest way possible.

"Old Maids are awfully easy, aren't they?" she said happily.

Egbert stared uneasily at his handful of pasteboards. He seemed to be very ill at ease and his thin hands fluttered nervously, arranging his cards. Beth Anne did not guess that his stiff manner hid as much shyness as she had ever known in her most embarrassed moments.

"I think any form of gambling a waste of time," he said finally with a sigh and frown.

"Oh, but this isn't gambling!" cried Beth Anne, shocked to the core. "My mother and father wouldn't let me play grown-up games. This is just fun!"

"Oh, come on, let's get started," said Ben cheerfully. "We haven't all night to gas in. It's your turn first, Bess."

So Bess pulled a card from Geraldine's hand and, being lucky, she took another from Claire, and so the game started.

But Beth Anne's spirits kept sinking lower and lower; for in spite of Jinny's persevering politeness and Bess's good-natured fun and Ben's hilarious spirits, it was not like the usual parties among the intimate five. Geraldine and Claire were as quiet as mice, and Egbert seemed to be merely enduring the experience instead of enjoying it. The two girls in their elaborate lace dresses and white kid slippers looked as out of place among the simple afternoon frocks of the G. S. C.'s as did Egbert's spick and span patent leather pumps, silk stockings and stand-up collar. Beth Anne sighed as she looked at them. They were all rather too pale for healthy children, and, beside the blooming faces of the others, the trio from Stepping Stones looked listless and unwholesome.

The game of Old Maids dragged, notwithstanding Ben's lively chatter and Francie's gleeful shouts as he scooped in the cards right and left. The girls felt the spell of the newcomers and could not be their natural selves.

Beth Anne felt like laying down her cards and weeping at the miserable failure of the friendly party, for at the end of the game when Francie triumphantly proclaimed himself victor, the Van Meters were as quiet, as lifeless and as listless as before they had begun to play. The only bright spot was the eagerness with which Egbert turned the puzzles as soon as the circle about Beth Anne's chair broke up.

"Which is the hardest puzzle?" he asked with a very human gleam of superiority as he moved over to inspect the table, and when he had been provided with two of the most difficult, he settled down with something like pleasure on his thin face, and could not be persuaded to leave the table for the rest of the afternoon.

The others played games. That is, they tried to; but there were many difficulties in the way, it seemed, and most of the time was spent in arranging and preparing for the games that were suitable. Claire could not

play anything requiring rapid speech, as she stammered when she tried to speak quickly and it was against the doctor's orders to hurry her. Geraldine, too, had to be carefully considered.

"I can't play hard games. I am not allowed to think much," she said with dainty precision and with a kind of pride in her peculiar weakness.

They managed to get through the afternoon somehow and, although Beth Anne was not quite so happy as she had hoped, she felt some pleasure in the lukewarm politeness of Geraldine and Claire, who were evidently trying to be quite sociable, while Egbert's complete absorption in the puzzles proved that he was at least contented.

Nevertheless she was very glad indeed when Mary at last came in to say that the time for the simple refreshments had arrived. "I do hope they are allowed to eat cake and stuff," she thought. "They're so careful about themselves no one knows what they may do."

George brought in the tray and arranged the tables with their pretty dishes with good little cakes and pink and white ice-cream and Beth Anne turned to Geraldine who was still sitting near her.

"Don't you love pink ice-cream?" she asked with her blue eyes shining. "It always tastes twice as good to me as the plain, flubbity colors."

Geraldine nodded politely, dabbling her spoon in the rosy portion. "I like it pretty well," she replied in her prim voice. "It looks queer though, doesn't it, just plain like this? We always have it in moulds."

Beth Anne flushed. She caught herself in time, however, for her mother's ideals of the duty of a hostess to her guests had been well defined, and loyalty to those standards was part of Beth Anne's very self.

"I like the roses and water-lily shapes, too," she agreed, subduing her vexation. "We have it that way at holidays and for real parties, but this is only a make-believe party,

you know—just to get acquainted. Don't you like the nut cakes? They're frightfully good."

Geraldine sighed patiently. "Nuts don't agree with me," she said with an odd mixture of regret and self-approval in her tone. "Almonds with the skins on are very indigestible."

"Oh, are they?" said the amazed Beth Anne blankly. "I'm sorry."

Here Geraldine rose and went primly to the corner bookcase, where unnoticed she had deposited a small parcel when they had come in. Beth Anne had a swift notion that she was to have a present and began a pleased remonstrance, when Geraldine calmly undid the paraffine wrapper, and displayed a package of whole wheat biscuit, which she quietly offered to Egbert and Claire.

There was a dreadful moment of stricken silence, and then Mary, who had been out of the room for a moment, broke the tension by coming gaily in with a big bowl full

of crackers and favors which she had unearthed from the depths of the library closet in her search for a new game.

"See what I found," she said, holding out the bowl with its red and gold jumble piled high. "Now it will seem more like a party. Who wants the first cracker? Claire, or Geraldine, or Egbert?" she asked, expecting a rush for her wares.

Claire sat still and stammered something Beth Anne could not catch; Geraldine got up and bobbed primly and sat down again; while Egbert voiced the sentiments of the trio, saying with a chilling politeness:

"Thank you very much, Miss Stone. We are never allowed to touch explosives."

Ben's derisive snort sounded like a cannon shot in Beth Anne's fidgety ears and she almost jumped out of her chair at Francie's subdued but sarcastic cough.

Mary put down the bowl with a kindly smile. "These crackers couldn't possibly hurt you, my dear," she said gently, "but of

course you must do as you have been told. Perhaps we had best leave them for another day, Beth Anne dear. I see the maids coming out of Stepping Stones gate, and we haven't time for them, anyway."

The party broke up in a chilled and spiritless fashion. The Van Meters said good-bye in an exact mechanical way, and with polite assurances from Egbert that they had all had a delightful afternoon, they filed out, protected by the two maids and the tall strong man in livery.

Mary wisely left them to themselves for a while and there was a storm of hot words at once; Ben and Jinny being, for a wonder, the most tolerant of the intimate five.

Jinny's great eyes were big with purpose, and her whole face was shining. "You people oughtn't to be too hard on them," she argued. "They haven't had the chance you have. Fathers and mothers are so dreadfully different, you know. Maybe if we tried to be nice and showed them what fun it

really is to play all sorts of games and romp about like wild Indians as we do, they'd learn how to,—after a while."

"Sure! They're not so bad," Ben's tone was very brisk and assured. "You can't expect them to be anything but flabby. We've been good sports all our lives, and it's different with us. Let's try to stiffen them up a bit. We'll ask them to the Gym meeting, Pank, and that'll help take the starch out of them if anything will."

Beth Anne shot a triumphant glance at Jinny, who signaled back her satisfaction in this unasked proposal of Ben's, but they said never a word till they should hear Francie's verdict.

Francie frowned and grunted a bit but ended by coming out with a reluctant, "All right. I'm game," adding bitterly, "Though I do hate that stuck up Polly of an Egbert."

Ben laughed tolerantly. "There's no use getting so hot over him," he counseled the indignant Francie. "He's a poor soft thing.

Why, he hasn't any more muscle than a baby! He doesn't know any better. And he never will unless we show him how."

Beth Anne's face glowed and she sat up straight in her chair. "Let's try to make them like our sort of fun!" she cried. "Let's show them what good times we have and then if they seem to want to be really-for-truly, live meat persons, we can let them come to the club meetings regularly,—why, we might even have them in the club ——"

"Hold on, Beth Anne," commanded Francie severely. "You're going a lot too fast. Wait till we see how those Miss Nancys like the first meeting and then go ahead."

Beth Anne's spirits sank swiftly under this practical advice. "I don't believe they'll like it at all," she confessed ruefully. "They are such niminy-piminy creatures ——"

"That's the name for them—Niminy-Piminies!" cried Bess with a gay laugh. "It's a shame to say it, but they do remind me of a lot of sick kittens."

Ben thumped on the table. "The meeting will please come to order," he commanded. "The president of the great G. S. C. of Centreville has something to propose."

The girls clapped their approval and Francie cried, "Fire away, Ben. We're ready for anything now."

CHAPTER IX

PLOTS AND PLANS

Ben's plan was only another form of his proposal to invite the Van Meters to that very next Saturday meeting in the renovated Gym after Beth Anne could get about again, and to make the stunts so easy and so attractive that they would be captivated in spite of themselves and would long to join in the fun.

"We'll have the place fixed up fine by that time," he said confidently, "and we'll have nice ladylike tricks that will appeal to our friend with the pumps."

"That's a perfectly splendid idea," said Beth Anne with unusual humility. The party had taken all her self-esteem and she was very grateful to Ben for taking hold with such good will.

Ben puckered his brow. "The girls won't be so bad, if they once wake up," he said hopefully. "The toughest part will be Miss Egbert. I'm afraid he'll balk."

Bess's brown eyes snapped. "He'll come in if it looks real brainy," she said with a giggle. "Didn't you notice how he puffed himself about getting out that puzzle so soon? We'll make him think it's too hard for him, and that'll bring him, see if it doesn't."

"He really does know a lot," said Jinny. "Geraldine told me that he reads splendid books."

"Pooh, he's nearly fourteen," said Francie. "We'll know a lot more next year, shan't we, Ben?"

"Trouble is, I don't know what to start on," said Ben, rubbing his dark hair till it stood on end. "I can only think of circuses and baseball and ——"

"We might start with a spelling-bee," suggested Jinny doubtfully.

"Or a book party," added Beth Anne.

"Everybody come as books and talk like them, you know."

"How about a debate?" asked Francie. "Bet he'd like to gab away like anything."

"We've got to have something that they can all get into," said Ben decisively. "What do you say, Bess?"

"I think they're all pretty good ideas," she replied. "Beth Anne's is the best, though, because you can dress up and act like a book whether you have much gumption or not. Claire couldn't join in the spelling-bee and Geraldine wouldn't be allowed to think enough even to listen to a debate."

"The book party it is, then," announced Ben. "I'll come as ——"

"Oh, don't tell!" cried Beth Anne. "That's part of the game, guessing what book you are!"

"Well, that's settled, anyway," said Francie. "What's bothering me is how we're going to get ice-cream and cake without letting the grown-ups know."

"Aw, charge it," advised Ben, easily. "We'll save enough by the end of the month to pay up then."

The horrified chorus from the girls put an end to that brilliant plan, but Jinny offered a suggestion that was hailed with cheers from the boys.

"We've some money in the treasury, haven't we, Bess?" she began, when the applause stopped her.

"I've a whole dollar I saved for the church fair, and I can't go, so I'll give that. It'll be lots more fun, you know."

"We fellows will pony up, too," said Ben readily. "I guess we can scrape enough together to make it."

"If we're going to have them every week, we'll have to cut the refreshments after this first one," said Francie, wisely. "This'll take all my allowance for the rest of the month, for we've simply got to have things in dandy shape or bust. I wouldn't have him turning up his elegant nose at the

'nahsty common' ice-cream, as Geraldine did at yours, Beth Anne."

"Oh, we'll have things fine enough this first time," declared Ben, jubilantly. "We'll show them we can do things right."

"We'll have a regular splendid party," said Bess, clapping her hands excitedly. "Your mother won't mind our having chocolate and ice-cream and all that, will she, Francie?"

"Not much," declared Francie, warmly. "They never fuss as some people do. When they gave me the Gym they didn't keep a string on it. They're not that kind."

Beth Anne bubbled with delight at the pleasing prospect of remodeling the Van Meters.

"We'll make them just love it!" she cried. "We'll have a perfectly gorgeous time, see if we don't."

"Hurrah for us!" Ben bounced up impulsively. "Here's to the Grow Straight Club of Centreville! And here's to the Niminy-Piminies! Hip hip——"

"Wait a bit till I get that name," said Francie chuckling. "Niminy-Piminy. Gee! that certainly suits them down to the ground. I was going to call them flabbies, but this is heaps better."

Beth Anne sprang to the defense of the absent trio. "They are niminy-piminy now, but they're going to be really-for-truly people some day," she said hopefully, and the other girls echoed her speech.

The good-byes had then been said. Francie had paused on the threshold to call back in a subdued tone:

"Don't believe he'll ever be a Really-for-truly. He's too stuck on himself. He's a Niminy-Piminy for keeps!" and he slammed the door and fled after the others.

In the week that followed this exciting afternoon the new club was even more active than it had been in the first fortnight of its existence. Beth Anne was still confined to the long chair and the meetings held in the sun-parlor were the chief delights of her long

days. The reports of the others kept her pretty well informed as to the progress they had made in this new adventure of friendship with the pale and pampered Van Meters.

A call from the trio in acknowledgment of the Saturday party was all that she had seen of them, although she had been most eager in her invitations to them to come at any time and read or play with her. She had offered to lend Egbert her choicest books, only to be met with a polite refusal. "I probably read much more advanced matter than you," he had said, and to Beth Anne's deep disgust, he would not even listen to the names of her favorites. Geraldine had not been much better, for she had sighed and gazed out of the window when Beth Anne tried to talk about the doings of the Centreville girls, and only Claire had shown any interest in the extinct Dramatic Club or the afternoon teas for the Sewing Class.

But it takes a great deal of determination to withstand the combined efforts of a band

of five active spirits and, without knowing it, the Niminy-Piminies began to weaken about the end of the second week. Egbert agreed to lend Ben a book on fishing, and Geraldine had walked as far as the corner store with Bess and Jinny unattended by a single maid.

"We've got 'em," said Ben, coming to the hastily arranged meeting on Beth Anne's last day in prison. "They've fallen at last."

"Oh, what do you mean?" asked Beth Anne, all a-quiver with excitement. "Have they promised to come, after all?"

"Uh-huh," said Ben, grinning at their intent faces. "Miss Egbert has decided that a book party is just about as poor a form of fun as you can get, but he's coming. And he's going to see that Gerry and the Chocolate Eclair are done up in some high-brow titles that will keep us all guessing."

"Jiminy, what fun!" cried Bess. "It's worth waiting for, isn't it, Francie? We'll have the time of our lives to-morrow afternoon."

Francie sniffed. "Much fun mooning

around with them," he grumbled. "I wish we hadn't started the old thing. I've slaved and tacked and scrubbed and polished till I'm sick of it. The Chocolate Eclair isn't bad, and Geraldine might possibly be worse, but he's too much for me, with his airs."

Beth Anne giggled and her eyes danced. "You'll learn to like him yet," she gurgled. "We're going to make him your special property when Ben gives him up."

Francie's glare was unspeakable. Ben chuckled.

"I'm not giving him up, my son," he said comfortably. "He's too sweet a proposition to waste on the likes of you. Are you coming over to see the Gym before the party starts, Beth Anne? You'll open your eyes when you see how we've done up the old place."

"Better toddle over before the aristocracy arrives," said Francie with a laugh, "or you may shock the high-born by showing that you like anything that we ignorant cree-chahs have rigged up."

Beth Anne looked troubled. "I wish you didn't feel so snippy about them," she said anxiously. "It spoils everything to have any of the G. S. C. feel that way."

Ben, as usual, came to Francie's rescue.

"He doesn't mean half he says," he chuckled. "He's as good as promised to take Miss Egbert to his uncle's library next week. Don't you be afraid of him, Beth Anne."

Francie grinned sheepishly. "Got to make some sort of a bluff," he parried. "We'll be as bad as they are if we get too sweet."

Beth Anne sighed happily as she lay back in her chair watching them race down the long drive.

"It's coming out beautifully, isn't it, Jinny-pinny?" she said happily. "I'm perfectly crazy to see the club room. I believe I'll try walking about the porch a bit. Dr. Bradford said I might go as far as the terrace if I went slowly."

"HOW DID YOU EVER DO IT?"

CHAPTER X

THE TESTING OF THE NIMINY-PIMINIES

"Oh, ger-acious goodness me!" cried Beth Anne, as they stepped into the big room. "How splendiferous!"

Egbert and his sisters, whom they had seen go up the stairs just before them, were not in sight and Bess, with Ben and Francie, rushed forward eagerly to welcome them.

"Isn't she a dandy?" exulted Ben, gazing about proudly. "Took the wind out of Miss Egbert's sails, I tell you! He's as mum as a mackerel, but he looked some surprised."

"Haven't we worked awfully hard?" crowed Francie. "I've got five blisters and about fifteen blacks-and-blues,—falling off ladders and everything."

"How did you ever do it?" marveled Jinny, admiring the taste with which the old

draperies had been hung and the flags draped and the flowers and ferns placed.

"Why, it doesn't look a bit like the old play-room, Francie," cried Beth Anne, overflowing with praise.

The boys fairly cackled with pride, but Bess said, generously, "We couldn't have done it, Beth Anne, if we hadn't remembered how they used to be fixed in the old studio. We copied that as much as we could, and that's why it looks so fine."

"Bess made us do it," explained Ben, with a twinkle. "She was the very dickens to work for, I tell you. I never knew she could be so bossy."

"Well, our gardener lent us the plants, and we put them where he thought they'd look best," added Francie, not quite willing that Bess should have all the praise. "That helped a lot, too."

"I declare, if you haven't a lot of new Gym things," cried Beth Anne in the middle of the room, staring first at one end and then at

the other. "You've a new rowing-machine and a big horizontal bar. And there is our gorgeous tea-table and a really-for-truly brass teakettle! Where did you get all those extra cushions and stuff? Jinny never breathed a word about them."

"Oh, we begged some, and Uncle John gave us the machines, and we just hooked the kettle for this afternoon. We aren't going to use it, of course, but it looks mighty classy among the cake dishes and glasses, doesn't it?" said Ben, admiring the sumptuous aspect of the feminine portion of the big room.

"Why, you aren't dressed yet," exclaimed Jinny, discovering the fact with surprise. "Did you just get here, too?"

Bess held the collar of her long coat tighter, as though afraid they might penetrate its secret, and Ben and Francie grinned importantly.

"We're all going to come out at once, so there won't be any fuss about the guessing," explained Bess, leading the way to the girls'

dressing-room. "Ben and Francie have their things over behind the big screen and Egbert is in the corner back of the magic-lantern sheet. We girls are all together, though," she ended as she parted the long curtains that screened the old granary. "Geraldine and Claire must be ready by this time."

Beth Anne squealed at the sight of the neat table with its white cloth, mirror and hair brushes.

"Haven't they fixed it up splendidly?" she bubbled to Geraldine, who was standing by the table. "Isn't it lots of fun?"

Geraldine was still in her coat, and looked very troubled. "It's very nice," she replied, so limply that Beth Anne longed to shake her. "But I can't stay. I've forgotten my slippers."

She held out a slim foot shod in delicate cloth and patent leather. "I can't wear high shoes, you know," she said dismally. It was evident that she was really in earnest, and also very much disappointed.

Claire sniffed. "I'll have to go too," she complained. "It wouldn't be polite to let you go alone."

"What stuff!" cried Bess, vigorously. "Those shoes are perfectly good enough for any of our Saturday parties. We aren't daft over clothes, anyway. Don't be a goose, Geraldine!"

Beth Anne caught a fearful breath. She expected the prim Geraldine to take instant offense, but to her great surprise, she merely wavered, staring at her pretty shoes with a little frown of perplexity.

Bess saw her advantage and followed it up quickly. "Take off your things and forget those slippers," she commanded briskly. "We haven't much time."

Claire nudged her hesitating sister. "Maybe it would be politer to stay," she said anxiously. "They're waiting for us, Geraldine, and Miss Simpkins says it's fearfully rude to keep people waiting."

Geraldine gave a sigh, and then she smiled

a pale resolute smile. "I'll stay," she replied. "It's the very first time I ever wore high shoes to a party, though. I hope the rest of them won't notice."

Beth Anne gurgled at the notion of the boys caring how they were shod. "You might wear horseshoes,—for all they'd care," she laughed. "All we're thinking about is who'll guess all the books' names first. We've a sort of prize for that, and we're all bound to have that prize,—though it isn't worth much."

"What do you have it for, then?" asked Geraldine, pausing in taking off her cloak. "Prizes aren't any good if they don't cost a lot, are they? We always have the finest we can find. We don't want the other children to make fun of us, you know."

Bess gave an impatient click, and Jinny frowned, but Beth Anne broke into an amused ripple.

"We never have big prizes,—they spoil the fun," she explained with sunny content in the superior sense of the intimate five, as

compared with Geraldine's critical friends. "We'd rather do the things just because we like to do them. We had the prize to-day because you looked so disappointed last week when you won the twirling-game and didn't get a prize. Oh, what in the world are you?" she cried, as Bess stepped out of her wraps. "Turn around and let's look at you!"

"No fair guessing now!" interposed Jinny, who was eager to escape. "Come on, Geraldine; we'll go in together."

Claire, who had a new light in her eyes, dropped her dark cloak and Beth Anne shook off her wraps and they filed out into the big room.

The three boys were waiting for them. They stood in a stiff row, each with his eyes glued on the floor and a resolute expression on his face. Beth Anne's heart sank at the fear they had been quarreling, but she found it was merely Ben's idea of square dealing, so that they should all start even in the guessing contest.

"Line up there," commanded Ben. "We're going to serve the tablets and have you write your guesses down right away, so we can get to the stunts and other fun. Now, don't say a word, Beth Anne. We don't care if it isn't the regular way,—we're going to do it. Get the pencils, Pank, and I'll serve the paper, while you young ladies get your minds at work on our distinguished guest," and he gave Egbert a friendly slap on the shoulder that certainly would have made him wince if he had been his usual prim self.

Beth Anne's eyes began to shine as she looked.

The figure that stood with folded arms and erect head met her gaze with a very different expression from Egbert's cool, patronizing stare.

A Highland bonnet sat jauntily on the red hair,—Egbert's was dark and waving,—and the short kilt of plaid stuff showed, instead of the scrawny knees that had called forth Francie's contempt, a pair of fat woolly joints

which Beth Anne recognized as Claire's red eider-down leggings. By his side hung a short glittering sword and the handle of a dirk peeped from his belt. A long plaid draped about his shoulders gave added breadth to his form and he looked so much older than usual that Beth Anne was impressed in spite of herself.

"Oh, but you're splendid!" she cried in honest admiration. "Who'd have dreamed you could look like that! Are you just one?" she asked, the conviction that he must represent "The Scottish Chiefs" growing as she looked.

"Awa' wi' your blither-blether, woman," he answered, to her intense delight. "I'm no for ower mony. I'm juist masel',—nane ither."

"Why, he's Scotch," exclaimed Francie, and then reddened at the shout of laughter at his tardy recognition of the kilts and plaids of the doughty warrior.

"Richt weel guessed, Lowlander," said Egbert, holding his head higher. "But gi'

me nane o' yer glowerin' looks or I'll slit yer gullet wi' ma bonny claymore here," and he tapped the sword threateningly.

There was a burst of applause at this splendid imitation of rage, and the canny Highlander could not forbear a swagger as he advised them to go on with the inspection.

"Yon lass is no weel kent," he said, pointing to Geraldine, who was attired in hoops and lace mitts and carried a reticule with knitting in it. "It'll take a hantle o' speirin' and spyin' to come at her, I'se warrant," and he wagged his red head magnificently.

Beth Anne clapped her hands, flashing a triumphant look at him. "I know you! I know you!" she cried. "I read you last winter at ——"

"Here, here! No telling!" commanded Ben. "It's Geraldine's turn now, anyway. Step up, miss, and let's look you over."

Geraldine moved mincingly into the center. She seemed much embarrassed by the many

pairs of curious eyes, but she was as prim as ever.

"Martha Washington, for sure!" cried Francie. "That's dead easy."

The Scotsman glowered at this ignorance. "Nane o' yer gab o' names," he warned, and then added in a disgusted undertone, "As if Martha Washington looked like that!"

Beth Anne racked her brain, but could not make Geraldine fit into any of the titles that came to her mind, so she turned with relief to Bess, who was next in line.

"Oh, I know you by your gl——" she blurted out, stopping herself in time. "You're perfectly splendid."

Bess wore a faded calico dress, and her dark curls were in a tight knob, but the lace collar and black cotton gloves showed that she was in holiday dress. The others were puzzled by the trailing calico, but Beth Anne giggled over the memory of that dinner where Mrs. Wiggs politely wore her best gloves all through the meal, and then gave her attention to the next.

"Claire's dead easy," exclaimed Francie, in rather disappointed tones, as the little red-cloaked figure turned gravely about for inspection. "It's a cinch I've got two right, anyway."

Beth Anne, however, did not feel so sure. "Egbert wouldn't let her have anything so easy," she thought, wisely. "It must be something frightfully hard to guess. He's twice as clever as the others."

So she tried to find a title to fit the red cloak and she paid so little attention that when Ben strutted out in his fur hat and coat and trousers made from the old goatskin rug and carrying a sunshade of painted pasteboard, she forgot to even lower her voice as she said, loftily:

"Why, any one would know Robinson Crusoe! How childish."

The burst of reproach brought her to herself with a bounce, and for a tingling second she was ready for battle, but a swift memory of her many good resolves shot across her

mind, and she caught her pink lips together resolutely.

"I didn't mean to say it out loud," she said, very humbly and very much to her own satisfaction. "I was thinking about something else. I'm awfully sorry,—really-for-truly I am."

She had her reward in the admiring glance that Claire turned on her, and the whispered word from Jinny.

"You're a real Grow Straight, Beth Anne dear," she said as she slipped to the post of inspection, and Beth Anne's bright head began to wag with a bit of the old time self-satisfaction. She saw herself as the clever yet modest leader of the noble band of the celebrated Grow Straight Club, setting such a bright example of unselfish goodness that the whole village hailed her with admiration and respect, and quarrels were unknown where she dwelt.

She was so absorbed in this delightful vision that she hardly glanced at Jinny, whose costume she had guessed long ago.

"I'm getting ever so much better," she thought, comfortably. "I like even the Niminy-Piminies to-day. Egbert is really clever, and Geraldine isn't so bad in that nice funny old-fashioned dress. I wish she liked me more, though. You can't reform people much when they don't like you." The memory of the Jones boys added this bit of wisdom, and she giggled at the picture of that serious dressed-up dog.

Claire, who was watching her, edged nearer and slipped a hand into hers. "He is awfully funny, isn't he?" she whispered, too polite to comment out loud for fear of hurting Francie's feelings. "His coat's so big and his hat just swallows him up. Do you know what he is?"

Beth Anne was so delighted with this unexpected friendliness on the part of the reserved Claire that she paid little attention to Francie, in his big military coat and hat, with a string of medals across his swelling chest and two little toy soldiers dangling from

his buttonhole. She squeezed Claire's hand and slipped an arm about her, as she answered easily:

"I guess I know him. He doesn't read much but Cooper and Kipling, so it's bound to be one of them. Egbert's twice as clever about books."

Claire opened her eyes. "I thought you disliked him," she said simply. "He told me you glared at him terribly when he wouldn't play Old Maids last week."

Beth Anne flushed and squirmed. As vice-president of the G. S. C. she felt she must try to wipe out that dark past.

"Oh, well, I wasn't very well then," she explained rather painfully. "I think he's splendid to-day. Did you guess Jinny? She's clever, too, and just as sweet——"

"Come on, Miss Limpty," commanded Ben. "You're the last, so amble out."

Beth Anne released Claire with a start. "Why, I forgot all about myself!" she exclaimed in pleased wonder at her growing saintliness.

She fluttered out and spread her rags and tatters with a whirl of laughing mischief. "See how rich I am!" she cried, holding out her basket with its fat money-bags, and showing the array of golden coins that hung about her in such profusion. "You'll never guess me if you keep at it till you're black in the face."

"The Maiden All Forlorn!" cried Francie in a pleased tone, and then subsided muttering, "No, that's not a book. Must be—um—um——"

The others puckered their brows for the allotted minute and then Bess gave a giggle and Egbert gave a real Scotch snort, and Beth Anne's sparkle died out instantly.

"I don't believe you've guessed!" she said. "You're just pretending. That's awfully mean."

"Time's up," called Ben good-naturedly. "Get the papers from them, Pank. Step up to the blackboard, Miss Jinny Randolph, and write us down."

Francie collected their written lists and then as each revealed his own title Jinny wrote it on the blackboard in a clear large hand.

Beth Anne's head was tossing, and she smiled sweetly as the list grew. "I guessed Egbert for Rob Roy and Jinny for Snow-White right off," she thought complacently. "Of course any one could have known Ben, and I remembered Francie liked Kipling, so 'Soldiers Three' was pretty easy to remember. And Bess was Mrs. Wiggs ——"

She stopped as Claire's name was posted on the board. "Why, she's Red Riding-Hood, after all!" she called out in great astonishment.

"Did you think she could be any one else?" asked Egbert, in his unfeigned surprise dropping into every-day speech again.

Beth Anne was too disappointed for concealment. "I thought you were too clever to let her be just a plain old book like that," she explained in an injured tone. "I thought she must be history, or something splendid."

Egbert looked at her for the first time with something like approval.

"I didn't have anything to do with getting Claire up," he said. "Geraldine took all my time. And besides, Claire wouldn't let me help her. She's an independent piece, for all she stammers so, and looks so dainty and mild."

Beth Anne gurgled. The idea of his small sister's opposition seemed an act of unparalleled courage to her at that moment when Egbert in his plaids and kilts was so truly imposing.

"She's a duck, isn't she?" she asked with sudden warmth. "I know I'm just going to love her."

Egbert retired into his cool manner and gave her a slow stare, and his pale face flushed. "That's because she won't mind me," he said sagely. "You think I'm inclined to be too dictatorial. But I can tell you, Miss Poor-Little-Rich-Girl, that you'll find yourself very much mistaken," and he stalked off to join

the group at the blackboard, leaving Beth Anne gasping at his having guessed her title.

She heard her name and title posted almost with indifference.

"Oh, dear, he's snippy again,—just as he was going to be so nice, too!" she lamented as she waited the decision of the judges. "I thought he'd like my praising Claire but he doesn't seem to at all. I'll have to begin all over again," and she sighed deeply at the uphill prospect.

A shout from the others startled her.

"You've won the prize, B. A. B.," called Bess from the bowl where she had been sorting the list. "You have them all right but Claire."

It was a blissful moment for Beth Anne and her gloom fled. She danced over to them crying excitedly, "Did I guess Geraldine after all? I wasn't sure about the 'Old Fashioned Girl,'—it was so long since I'd read it."

Suddenly she stopped and drew back the hand she had extended for the prize. "I

can't take it, though," she said with a steadily brightening look. "I helped get it, and it would be awfully piggy of me to take it."

"Beth Anne is right," said Bess, cheerfully, while the others hesitated. "We girls gave the prize, so we oughtn't to keep it for ourselves."

"Just as you say," returned Ben with good-natured indifference. "Egbert's next. Catch hold, old man. It'll do for your den."

Egbert received the gay blue and yellow cushion with great satisfaction and thanked them for it in very good Scotch; then Ben flung off his fur hat and shied his parasol to the farthest end of the Gym.

"Book party's over," he announced briefly. "Refreshments next!"

With the end of the book party the same silence which had enveloped the Van Meters at Beth Anne's party descended on them and they partook of the elaborate ices and dainty cakes as quietly as though, to quote Bess, they were "Egyptian mummies without any

tongues." Ben in particular felt decidedly dashed because not one of the three commented on the ices, which were in the form of tennis racquets, baseball bats and other sporting goods.

"Not a peep out of one of them," he whispered to Beth Anne in disgust at such indifference. "You're right about them, I guess. They're niminy-piminy all the way through."

But when the trio had departed, leaving an invitation for the club to come to Stepping Stones on the following Tuesday afternoon, he experienced a change of heart.

"Say, they aren't so bad after all, are they?" he said jovially, gobbling the cakes that Bess offered him.

"We've done pretty well, I think," said Jinny. "Egbert's ever so much nicer than he was the other day, and he's clever, too. Geraldine's beginning to get used to us, and Claire ——"

"Has a monumental smite on Beth Anne," interposed Francie grinning. "You ought to

bring her into sporting life in no time, Beth Anne. She's that gone she'll follow you blindfold."

Beth Anne tingled with pleasant anticipation. "I'll try to start her right away," she promised eagerly. "I'll try to get her to do that folk-dance. That will be a good easy start, won't it?"

"She'd make hash of the song, though," Francie reminded her. "She stutters something awful if any one looks at her. She's as shy as the mischief."

A large resolve was forming in Beth Anne's ready brain.

"Then I'll either sing it for her or cure her of stammering," she said grandly. "I think I know the very way to cure her. I'll see about it to-morrow."

"Tell us how you get along," cut in Ben. "We aren't to be left out of anything that's going."

Beth Anne promised. "I'll tell you all," she cried gaily. "Wait and see if I don't."

CHAPTER XI

A CURE FOR STAMMERING TONGUES

"Is Claire really coming?" asked Jinny with much interest.

Beth Anne nodded. "She's going to slip out when Geraldine's busy with Mademoiselle," she explained importantly. "She'll take the meadow-path,—so we can see her the moment she leaves their back garden."

"It's perfectly wonderful for her to venture out by herself," commented Jinny, leaning out into the sweet spring sunshine and peering excitedly into the misty distance.

The meadow-path lay, like a slender rambling ribbon, from their own back entrance, across the greening paddock, past the rear of the Stepping Stones property and ended in a tiny gate on the pike just back of Francie Drake's old carriage-house.

There was no one to be seen, however, save

a stray sheep or two in the paddock, and Jinny drew her head in with a sigh.

"I'd better get my algebra done," she said, and went resolutely to the battered desk which she was sharing temporarily with Beth Anne. "I wish you'd tell me, though, just what you're going to do for Claire. I've thought and thought, and I can't possibly guess. Do tell, Beth Anne dear. You know I never blab."

Beth Anne looked disturbed. "Wait till Claire comes," she urged. "It isn't anything much,—really-for-truly it isn't. I read of it in an old, old book, so it's bound to be good," and she rattled something in her pocket suggestively.

Jinny gave a last glance toward the window. "There she comes!" she cried, jumping up again. "Hurry up, and we'll catch her before she passes the pergola."

"Race you to the gate!" cried Beth Anne, clutching the precious pocket firmly, and bouncing after Jinny down the wide stairs.

Off they flew, and they reached the meadow-gate together just as Claire, scurrying past the mild-eyed sheep, slammed it behind her. Her breath was coming fast and her cheeks were actually pink with the excitement of the moment.

Beth Anne patted her hand with real pride. "Isn't it fun to run?" she bubbled eagerly. "You are ever so much better already. If you'd only try terribly hard to race about like Jinny and me, you'll be perfectly lovely some day."

Claire fairly glowed at this unexpected praise. "I'll do anything you tell me,—if I could be like you," she offered with a flash of real determination. "You and Jinny are ever so much prettier and—and—more *living* than any of the girls we know. What do you do to make your eyes shine and your cheeks so pink?"

Beth Anne and Jinny looked at each other in bewildered surprise.

"Why,—we don't do anything," they said,

surveying each other with minute attention. "We aren't any different from all the other girls we know."

"Oh, but you're different from our friends," cried Claire, decidedly. "I know you are, for Miss Simpkins said so too. She was the one who told Father about your eyes and cheeks; and he said we were to be allowed to play with you. He's very particular, you know, but he liked you and Jinny when he saw you in church yesterday. And he said we needed more red blood,—I suppose to make our cheeks pink."

"Yours are pink now!" cried Beth Anne, pointing a delighted finger at Claire's flushed face.

Claire's eyes dilated. "Are they really p-p-pink?" she stammered, putting her hand to her face. "I w-w-wish I could s-s-see them. Geraldine has a little m-mum-mirror in her vanity-box, but I haven't any yet."

"I should hope not!" said Jinny, indignantly. "Such silly things to carry about

with you! Who'd ever want to run or play or climb trees or anything nice with an old vanity-box dangling about her? Don't you ever get one, Claire."

Claire, much abashed by this outbreak on the part of one of her paragons, promised most heartily, all the more readily because Beth Anne's eyes were fixed upon her so steadily that they made her uneasy.

"I think you should try to stop stammering, Claire my dear," said Beth Anne, with that air of wisdom so familiar to Jinny and her other friends. "It is a very bad habit indeed."

Claire squirmed and her cheeks reddened vividly. "I have t-t-tried and tried, but I can't s-s-stop. I do it only when I'm excited," she confessed. "I guess Father will take me to a specialist pretty soon." She sighed at the prospect. "And maybe he'll snip off the end of my tongue, as Martha says."

"Oh, what stuff," said Jinny energetically. Claire seemed to call forth her warmest feel-

ings, and she hastened to set her right. "Martha is only saying that to make you afraid. Doctors don't do things like that, do they, Beth Anne? Martha's a bad girl, and Miss Simpkins ought to send her off——"

Beth Anne broke in, with her most solemn air. "Do you want to be cured, Claire? Cured right now?" she asked, impressively.

Claire looked alarmed. "Y-Y-Yes, I g-g-guess s-so," she faltered. "If it doesn't hurt."

Beth Anne, with her hand still deep in her pocket, smiled kindly on her. "It won't hurt a scrap," she promised, and the patient brightened.

"Come into the pergola," Beth Anne said, mysteriously.

She stalked on ahead, and when at her request Claire was seated on the stone seat beside Jinny, she stood before her and eyed her with an intent air.

"It's a very simple cure," she said, severely, "but you mustn't think it isn't a

good one. A very old Greek,—Diogenes, or Homer, or somebody who talked a lot,—maybe it was Cicero, I can't remember ——"

"For goodness' sake, Beth Anne dear, we don't care about the names!" laughed Jinny. "They're all dead, anyway, and one's as good as another."

Beth Anne shot a reproachful glance at her. "Maybe it was Livy who wrote all the histories," she insisted. "It would make you see how true it was if you knew his name, but I've forgotten. Anyway, this old Greek used to talk splendidly and people came miles to hear him, but the trouble was that he stuttered and it made him feel terribly. So he tried everything and all the doctors, but nothing helped till he took three pebbles from the brook and put them in his mouth, and kept them there all the time he talked. And that cured him! There!" she ended triumphantly, bringing her hand at last from her pocket and spreading it out before Claire's astonished eyes.

"Three white pebbles!" said Claire, looking at them as though they were very rare articles indeed, but not offering to touch them.

"And all you have to do is to put them in your mouth and keep them there while you're here with us," explained Beth Anne. "It's best not to do it too long the first time, I think."

"Do you think they'd cure me?" asked Claire of Jinny.

Jinny frowned thoughtfully. "I don't know," she answered, in evident doubt. "They might, you know. And it isn't very hard to try. You can spit them out any time you like, you know."

Claire, thus encouraged, took the pebbles gingerly. "Are you sure they are clean?" she asked, fingering them. "They might be full of germs,—or something."

Beth Anne flushed. "You don't think I'd give them to you if I hadn't scrubbed them, and washed them in alcohol first, do you?"

she cried indignantly. "I'm just as particular as you are!"

Her annoyance spurred Claire to action. She put the polished white pebbles one after another into her mouth, shrinking a little at each, but mumbling them over with as good a grace as she could call up, while Beth Anne and Jinny watched her eagerly.

"Now say something," commanded Beth Anne, aflame with zeal.

Claire shifted the pebbles into a lump in her cheek. "I c-can't t-t-talk with them right on my tongue," she complained, uncomfortably aware she was in the wrong.

Jinny squeezed her hand. "Put one in each cheek and just keep one on the tip of your tongue," she advised. "You'll get used to them better that way. Does she have to have three?" she asked, doubtfully. Claire's little mouth seemed much too small for Beth Anne's prescription.

Beth Anne nodded emphatically. "Diogenes or Homer, or whoever it was, had three,"

she insisted. "So it must be right. Come on, Claire, we are going to teach you a lot to-day. We'll help you up into the whispering tree and then we'll tell you about the lovely new dance we're going to have, just as soon as you're cured."

Jinny noticed that Claire looked up at the name and she explained that the whispering tree was the old bent beech where she and Beth Anne talked over their secrets together.

Claire rose, got her pebbles adjusted with a great deal of mumbling and twisting and then spoke slowly but very clearly.

"I can't climb trees," she declared, and then, very proud of her success, she gave a gulp, and clutched her throat. "I've swallowed one!" she cried in dismay. "Oh, dear!"

"Keep quiet!" cried Beth Anne, with true professional zeal. "Don't swallow any more. Wait till we see about it. Which one was it?"

It turned out to be the smallest stone of the

three, and on Jinny's declaring that she had often swallowed plum-stones by mistake and suffered no ill, they made up their minds that Claire was in no danger.

"Only don't talk any more till you're in the tree," advised Beth Anne, piloting Claire skilfully along the low gnarled trunk that sprawled invitingly at the border of the back garden. "Take Jinny's hand, and we'll be there in a jiffy."

Claire kept her teeth clinched hard on her remaining pebbles, and with one hand stretched before to Jinny and one behind to Beth Anne, she made the passage of the big, gradually-ascending trunk in perfect safety and found herself seated in the wide, comfortable crotch beside Beth Anne without knowing just how she had managed it.

"Now," said Beth Anne, judicially, "you may say something, Claire, just to see if your cure is going on all right."

Claire obediently got her pebbles in place and spoke in the same measured tones as before.

"I like to be up in trees," she said calmly. "It is very nice."

"There, what did I tell you?" exclaimed Beth Anne, in great elation. "She doesn't stammer a bit."

"That's because she isn't excited. She never stammers when she's quiet," argued Jinny. "Wait till she gets flustered again and then we can tell if she's cured. It isn't fair to judge now."

Claire nodded. "I guess I am getting cured, though," she said, with precision. "I have to think about the pebbles, and that makes me careful. I don't want to swallow any more, you know."

Beth Anne clapped her hands joyfully. "It's a perfectly splendiferous cure," she cried, exulting in the success of her scheme. "If we can only teach you the folk-dance as quickly, we'll make the boys open their eyes!"

They sat like three cheerful sparrows in the wide cozy center crotches of the big old

tree, and planned and chattered for a delightful half hour. Then Claire said it was time for her to go, since she could see Mademoiselle leaving by the side wicket, and knew that she must soon be missed.

They made the passage down the sloping trunk as successfully as the up-trip and Beth Anne beamed on Claire with as much pride as though she were one of the seven wonders of the world. "You're doing gorgeously, my dear," she said radiantly, as she released her hand and they stepped safely down on the grass. "If you keep on like this, we'll soon let you into a perfectly tor-mendous secret we have, won't we, Jinny?"

"She'll be ready pretty soon," agreed Jinny. "But she mustn't let on to Geraldine and Egbert for the world."

Claire realized that this mark of favor meant that these two most admirable beings were going to admit her to their own inner circle, if she were only worthy; and she gave a rapturous murmur.

"Oh, I'll do anything you say," she cried in the same words she had used before but with ten times the eagerness, and forgetting all about the two white pebbles. "I'll —— Oh! Oh!" and she broke off, gasping and spluttering, with one hand clutched to her throat.

"She's swallowed another!" cried Jinny in dismay, rushing to pat Claire on the back. "Pat her, too, Beth Anne; she's choking!"

Beth Anne was frantic at the sight of poor Claire choking and wheezing, and she thumped her with all her might, but without any effect. Claire gasped and struggled for breath and grew so red in the face that Beth Anne sobbed with fright, and stopped thumping to wring her hands and jump up and down in a perfect frenzy of fear.

"Oh, please, please don't," she implored the poor victim. "Can't you stop just for one minute, till I think what to do?"

Claire was getting black in the face, and Jinny, with her arm about her limp figure,

fairly glared at Beth Anne's helplessness. "Run for Mary Stone," she ordered in a tense voice. "Hurry!"

Beth Anne flew off with her heart banging away at her ribs in the most agonizing way. She had swift visions of Claire gasping her last breath out in Jinny's tender arms while she, Beth Anne, who had wrought all this havoc, was searching and searching for Mary through all the many rooms of the house. It seemed hours to her before her quick feet pounded on the back porch. She rushed through the kitchen past Car'line, who was busy with the dinner, and tore into the hall crying:

"Oh, Mary, Mary! Come quick. Claire's dying in the back garden!"

The cry brought Mary, white faced and startled, from the library, and as Beth Anne babbled out some sort of an explanation she caught a new terror from the look in Mary's face.

Mary was fleet of foot, and Beth Anne caught

up to her only as she reached the dividing hedge. She could hear Car'line, who had heard the cry and rushed out after them, panting along just behind, but she had no eyes save for Mary's set face. She was afraid to look at the two figures in the pergola, lest she should discover one of them laid flat and motionless on the stone seat.

Then suddenly a great wave of thankfulness swept over her,—Mary's face relaxed and she cried out in passionate relief, and hurried into the screen of clustering columns. Beth Anne's legs gave way under her, and she spread out her hands dizzily.

"She's all r-right! Claire's all right!" she gasped, with the big tears popping down her cheeks.

Car'line reached her as she stumbled over the tree-root, and Beth Anne turned and caught at her old nurse's arm, burying her face in the gay checks that covered Car'line's loving bosom.

"I only wanted to cure her," she sobbed,

plaintively. "I didn't mean to hurt her. And she was getting along so splendidly, too!"

Car'line patted her soothingly. "Nemmine, honey. Whatever you done or lef' undone, Miss Claire she spry as a cricket. See, she callin' you. So come, stan' up and ac' like a lady,—do now."

Beth Anne obeyed as promptly as she had used to when she was five and had not yet reached the dignity of being vice-president of a club. She dashed the tears from her eyes and burst from Car'line's arms like a whirlwind of penitence and gratitude.

"Oh, Claire, I'm so glad and so sorry!" she cried, flinging her arms about her and looking eagerly at her neck where she feared the fatal pebble might still be imbedded. "Are you quite, quite well again? Does it hurt you at all? Please forgive me for trying to cure you. I'll never do it again, really-for-truly I won't!"

Claire was a little paler than usual but otherwise she seemed quite recovered, in fact she was so much calmer than Beth Anne her-

self that one might have thought she had been the doctor instead of the patient in the recent cure.

"I'm all right. Please don't feel so bad," she said, uncomfortably. She evidently was not used to such a ferment of feeling. "I'm all right, thank you."

"Is it in there still?" asked Beth Anne. The spot in Claire's neck had a fearful fascination for her and she could not take her eyes off it.

Jinny gave an amused chuckle, and Claire opened her eyes to their very widest.

"Why, of course it isn't," she said composedly. "Jinny pulled it out with her fingers after you ran off."

This was an astounding piece of news, yet it must be believed, since Mary nodded assurance. "Jinny knew that she couldn't wait for help," she said with warm approval in her tone. "She did what many grown-up people would have been too slow to think of,—she used those slim, long fingers of hers. And so

Claire got her precious breath back again without any thanks to the rest of us."

"An' glory be to God 'at made her wits so quick and techy," added Car'line fervently. "She's done delivered us this day fer shore," and she hurried back to her neglected cookery.

"And now," said Mary, "I feel as though I had to make up for the failure of Beth Anne's treatment. Claire, my dear, should you be willing to let me try my own method of curing you of stammering? I promise it will not be severe," and she smiled gaily at her small audience.

Claire put out her hand and quietly slipped it into Mary's. "I'd just love it," she said, using Beth Anne's favorite phrase with sober emphasis.

"You see, I studied articulation,—which means speaking clearly," explained Mary. "And so I think I may be able to show you how to conquer your trouble, if you will have patience, and can come to me two or three times a week."

Claire promised eagerly, for Mary had gained the portion of her heart not already occupied by Beth Anne and Jinny.

"Suppose we keep it a secret for the present," suggested Mary. "We needn't tell any one until the cure is complete. You can manage to slip over here often,—perhaps even every other day,—and we shall see what can be done,—without pebbles," she ended with a ripple at Beth Anne.

The three girls were equally pleased. Beth Anne was glad that her blunder should have come off so harmlessly; Jinny was delighted to have their young pupil bound to them with another link, and Claire saw deliverance from her imperfect speech and intimacy with the objects of her admiration in this very agreeable arrangement.

They parted at the meadow-gate in a high state of satisfaction with the prospect of sharing Mary's secret endeavors to cure Claire and the added intimacy which the frequent lessons in clear speaking should give them. Both Beth

Anne and Jinny felt that things were going very much their way.

"It's a pity we had to put off the next Gym meeting for a whole week," said Beth Anne as she and Jinny watched Claire speeding across the meadows. "I do believe we'd had a lot of fun with them this week. I wish Ben and Francie weren't going off to Morton on that old motor trip. It's stupid waiting, when we might be doing things."

"We have the party to-morrow," Jinny reminded her.

Beth Anne gave a joyful prance. "That's so," she crowed. "We'll have lots of fun at that party. I'm positively certain *sure!* Let's go see what Mary says about our dresses. I'd like to wear my new blue one, if she'll let me."

CHAPTER XII

POLLY PHEMIE IS INTRODUCED

"Look, Jinny, look! There's Egbert coming out of the store," and Beth Anne, on her way home from school, pointed eagerly.

Jinny showed proper surprise. "Well, of all things!" she said with a little laugh. "He must be getting 'awful nice and common,' as Andy Witmer says,—to go into the store. I've never seen him do that before."

"He looks sort of different to me already," said Beth Anne hopefully. "I guess he'll soon be—— Why, there's Geraldine! And Claire, too!"

"I wonder what's happening?" said Jinny with vivid interest. "Let's hurry up and catch up to them."

It was easy enough to overtake the three Van Meters, for they were walking in their

customary quiet, demure fashion. Claire smiled brightly at them as they skipped up, but Geraldine and Egbert wore their usual indifferent calm and their pale faces showed no hint of that desirable pinkness which Claire had said was such an object to their father.

"We are taking a walk," Geraldine replied to their eager questions. "We thought we should like to get our mail, so we went into the store. There was nothing for us."

"The store smells funny, doesn't it?" said Claire with a little laugh. "I never saw so many queer things, either."

Egbert cast a disdainful glance at her. "Why shouldn't it smell queer?" he said reasonably enough. "You can't put sugar and horse-blankets and soap and gum-boots and lots of other things in a place and have it smell like a conservatory."

Beth Anne was delighted with this common-sense point of view. She had expected Egbert to scoff at the jumbled contents of the country

store, but it seemed that he had more judgment than she had given him credit for.

"I like that stuffy muffy smell," she said gaily. "It's different from any city store. You know you're in the country for sure when you sniff it, don't you?"

Egbert nodded, but Geraldine said placidly, "I like the New York stores. Father and Miss Simpkins are going to take us over for our spring things pretty soon. That will be great fun."

"I don't want to go at all," Claire spoke up promptly. "I'd rather do without new things than parade around those stupid stores all day."

Beth Anne could not wholly sympathize with this extreme point of view, although she did resent Geraldine's decided preference for everything that belonged to city life.

"It is fun to go shopping," Jinny agreed with a bright look at Claire. "I like it tremendously, but I just love the country, and I'm so glad I can be out here with Beth

Anne this year. We have lots more fun here than we did in town, don't we, Beth Anne?"

Beth Anne was glad that Jinny had shown the Van Meters so clearly that the joys of city life were not entirely new to them. She always rather resented being classed as country-bred, although she so dearly loved the wide meadows and whispering woods and shining brooks of her present home.

"I think you'll like it better after you're really-for-truly used to it," she said to Egbert. "You haven't seen a quarter of the nice things yet. Why, you don't know how to look for spring flowers, nor wade in the Ripple, nor ——"

"Nor go on picnics," interrupted Jinny. "Oh, we can show you lots of perfectly lovely things that you couldn't possibly do in town! Wait till you see what fun it is. You're bound to just love it,—we all do, and some of us were terribly city-fied,—once."

Egbert walked along with his eyes on the ground. He seemed to be thinking very

deeply, but his answer was not very satisfactory to either of the advocates of country life.

"Why do you have to show us how to like these things?" he asked in his cool, impartial manner. "If they are as pleasant as you say, I should think we might see it for ourselves. Did any one show you how to wade and fish and play?"

Beth Anne was rather taken aback by this question. "Why, we—we were different," she retorted. "We just naturally did all those things. And we loved them right spang off!"

"Oh," said Egbert, and he walked on looking straight ahead of him.

Beth Anne felt that it was time to go home, so she stopped and with a nod and a bright word to Claire and the impassive Geraldine she turned to join Jinny who had fallen behind after she had spoken so ardently in praise of her beloved countryside. Jinny was looking across the road and Beth Anne's eyes followed hers.

"There's Captain Dan'l on the hotel porch!" she cried with all her interest returning. "We haven't seen him since he first came. Do let's go over and see the parrot. Come on, Egbert, and the rest of you. We'll ask Captain Dan'l to make her talk."

Jinny agreed instantly. "He won't mind us coming if we make a fuss over Polly Phemie," she said briskly. "He's perfectly crazy over her, and I don't wonder, for she's just splendid."

Egbert looked instantly alert. "I should like to see the bird," he said, with more interest than he had shown. "Come along, Geraldine and Claire."

Claire stopped in the middle of the road. Captain Dan'l reading and smoking seemed very formidable to her.

"Oh, please don't g-go if he's c-c-ross," she stammered, to Beth Anne's intense disappointment. "I'm afraid of c-cross m-men." Mary's two lessons were quite a failure, to Beth Anne's mind.

Egbert turned his searching glance on her and she took a few steps, but stopped again.

Beth Anne glanced at the hotel porch, and gave a cry of disappointment as the burly form of the captain disappeared through the hall door.

"There, now, he's gone, and we can't hear her talk," she lamented. "She's the best talker you ever heard. We thought she was an old lady, didn't we, Jinny?"

Jinny nodded. "And so did—some one else, too," she asserted. "She says awfully funny things."

Egbert's thin face lightened with interest.

"I tell you what," he said. "We'll go over and make her talk to us. Come along now, Claire, and stop your nonsense. Nothing can happen to you while I'm here," and with this speech he hurried across the road, with the others tagging somewhat slowly in his wake.

The parrot trundled down to the side of her cage as they stood staring hopefully at her. She cocked her bright head at Egbert and in-

spected him first with one eye and then with the other, but never a word did she utter, though he tried to coax her with "Pretty Polly. Polly wants a cracker," and other condescending speeches.

"Humph, she's absolutely no good whatever," he said in a vexed tone. "I believe she must be suffering from some complaint,—the pip, no doubt."

The parrot was mute, crowding over to the furthest limit of her big cage.

"Silly thing, I don't believe you can say a word," said Egbert, and he poked the retreating bird with an impatient finger.

Quick as a wink Polly Phemie nipped the intruding finger with her strong sharp bill, squawking and screeching horribly at his cry of pain.

"I'm a lady! I'm a lady! Touch me if you dare!" she shrieked and then broke into mocking laughter.

Egbert was so taken aback by the clear human voice that he retorted sharply, "I wasn't

hurting you, you mean old thing! I hardly touched you at all!"

Beth Anne and Jinny squealed with delight, and even Geraldine giggled, but Egbert was outraged by the bird's insolence. He retreated a step from the cage, nursing his nipped finger and glaring at the sprightly Polly Phemie.

"Silly thing!" he repeated scornfully, trying to hold his own before her penetrating eye.

"Oh, go to thunder!" rapped out the parrot, cocking her head wickedly. "Cut it out! I'm an American. Touch me if you dare!"

Egbert succumbed to this marvelous performance. With a sheepish grin on his pale lips he turned to the little group of Polly's admirers.

"She's certainly a wonder," he said heartily, and then catching Beth Anne's laughing eyes he stiffened. "I presume her bite is very dangerous, though," he said, gloomily.

Beth Anne had small time for a black and blue finger, and she crowed jubilantly:

"What did we tell you! Isn't she splendid?"

"She is that. And the finest colored bird that ever came out of the tropics," said a deep voice behind them.

Beth Anne recognized it with a start of dismay, and they turned to face Captain Dan'l, whose red face was wreathed with smiles.

"She's the finest bird in the world," he repeated, nodding complacently to them and pointing with the stem of his short pipe to the trundling Polly Phemie. "Why, the tales I could tell you of that bird's cuteness, sir, would do your heart good."

Egbert swelled with pride at being addressed as "sir," but before he could make up a suitable reply, Beth Anne flashed in between him and his purpose.

"Oh, please tell us, too, some time! We'd simply love to hear them!" she cried with her most winning manner. "Mayn't we come some time and hear just one?"

The others were shocked at her rashness,

but the grizzled captain, with a big laugh, shook his head and held up a finger at her.

"You're that little sparrow that steered me into false moorings once before," he said good-naturedly. "I oughtn't to give in to your pretty ways, but if you've a mind to behave yourself and not gabble and interrupt, maybe I'll tell you that little one about how she saved my life off the Horn in the nineties. Come around some day soon if you've a mind to hear the yarn, and you may bring those two young jackanapes I see you cavorting with over in that playhouse there," and he nodded to the mansard roof of the cherished Gym. "I like the looks of that dark-haired young one they call Ben," he added to Egbert. "Bring him along with you, sir, and be here on time when I send for you, for I'm a punctual man, and can't abide loiterers."

Beth Anne was too much surprised to speak.

Egbert was evidently highly flattered. He made his precise bow and offered his hand.

"I shall be charmed to accept your kind invitation," he said primly, yet with real feeling. "I shall certainly be on time."

Captain Dan'l looked him over with a sort of pitying kindness.

"Well now, sonny, is that so?" he said, taking the thin hand in his huge hairy paw. "Well, well. You're over polite for one so young and skinny."

Beth Anne could not stay another moment. She fled. She was afraid the captain might resent her laughter and she simply had to giggle or burst.

When Jinny caught up to her she was shaking with mirth.

"Oh, wasn't he funny?" she cried. "I never dreamed he'd say things like that, and to Egbert, too!"

Jinny gurgled responsively. "Egbert didn't mind a bit," she said with wonder. "He seemed to like him tremendously for calling him 'sir.' And he's awfully set up because Captain Dan'l called him 'shipmate' and

said he had a pretty good chest for such 'a spindlin' sardine.'"

Beth Anne opened her blue eyes to their very widest. "Wasn't he mad at that?" she asked astonished.

Jinny shook her head. "He's as pleased as can be, and he promised to tell the other boys. Just fancy!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE DOVE OF PEACE

It was afternoon and the corner of the tavern porch where Polly Phemie's cage hung was filled with boys and girls, sipping cool lemonade from tall glasses and nibbling sweet biscuits, while Captain Dan'l relaxed after a series of thrilling sea tales, and beamed on them all impartially.

The party at Stepping Stones had not been a success. Egbert had been remote and distant both to his city guests and those of the G. S. C. Geraldine had almost forgotten her new acquaintances in the joy of seeing her old ones, and if it had not been for the gentle courtesy of Miss Simpkins and the devoted attentions of Claire, the whole afternoon would have been a stiff and wretched affair. As it was, not one of the intimate five really

enjoyed one moment of it, and they were glad to make their farewell speeches and slip out of the starched atmosphere into the cheerful air of their own gardens.

Beth Anne summed it all up very clearly in her diary : " The prizes were fearfully expensive. Bess got a silver bonbon dish. And we had strange things to eat. (G. and C. ate whole-wheat biscuit, as they did here that afternoon.) The girls would not stir nor play games. They did not want to muss their dresses. It was simply sufokating. I felt sad and lonesome. One girl looked like a sheep and goggled at us when we tried to play. She is worth two millions. Miss Simpkins is very refined though sweet. She makes me feel like a zebra which is never tamed by any human hand. Our parties are ten hundred times better. We like one another and we have fun."

Captain Dan'l's invitation had come to them with double joy, treading on the heels of this dismal failure, and even Beth Anne,

who was the most loyal one of the group, was not too much cast down by the news that Geraldine and Claire were spending a couple of days with their city friends and could not accept the captain's invitation.

This was a very different sort of affair from the stiff, starched gathering at Stepping Stones. The sunshine flickered through the lattice of the wide porch and Polly Phemie trundled sideways, cocking her head and biting at the wires of her cage.

Ben and Francie were plying their host with eager questions and Beth Anne had recovered enough to begin to fish out the snips of pineapple from under the lemon slices, when Jinny nudged her and motioned to the road.

Miss Carrie was walking briskly up the pike from the station, and must soon pass the hotel porch.

"Gor-acious!" whispered Beth Anne in sudden consternation. "She's seen us, too. She doesn't look a bit mad though, does she?"

"S-sh," cautioned Jinny, with an anxious glance at the jovial captain, who was as yet unconscious of the approach of his enemy.

Miss Carrie stepped along with a pleasant expression on her rather prim face. She had seen the young audience before they had spied her and was evidently prepared to be her usual kind self.

"Good-afternoon, boys and girls," she said in her crisp way, nodding brightly to them. "Good-afternoon, Cap'n Dan'l. I see you're havin' quite a party," and she stepped on her unruffled way as though talking to the captain were an every-day affair with her.

Beth Anne swallowed a lump of ice in her agitation. She was trembling for fear her new friend might not behave quite so well as her old one had, but her fears were groundless.

Captain Dan'l half rose from his rocker with what was intended for a graceful bow, and replied quickly: "How do you do, ma'am? Pleasant weather we're havin'," and dropped back in his chair, burying his red

face in his glass, chuckling and muttering to himself, until Polly Phemie called out shrilly:

"I'm an American. Touch me if you dare!"

Then he bounced out of his chair in good earnest and whisked the cage into the house, scolding at the impudent bird in a way that surprised Beth Anne very much indeed.

"What makes him cross at Polly?" she whispered to Jinny. "I thought he always liked to hear her talk."

Jinny looked perplexed, and then replied doubtfully, "I guess he doesn't want Miss Carrie to think he likes Polly to be rude to her. He's over being very, very mad, and perhaps he's begun to want to make up."

Beth Anne clasped her hands together rapturously. "Oh, if they only would!" she sighed. "I'd do anything to hustle them along. We haven't done a single thing yet, and he's been here ages and ages."

Starting up as Captain Dan'l returned, she handed him the lemonade pitcher with her

prettiest air, and hovered by the arm of his big rocker as he filled his glass.

"Doesn't Miss Carrie step along fast?" she said, catching at the first thing that came into her head. "She's a splendid walker. She does everything just like that, baking and sewing and everything."

She was half afraid the captain might dampen her enthusiasm, but he merely chuckled and took a sip of lemonade, so she went on with a wag of her bright curls and a triumphant glance at Jinny and Bess, nothing daunted by the task before her.

"She's terribly thorough about everything," she said, and then broke off, feeling that was not so good a beginning as was needed. The captain, however, was listening, though he pretended to be intent on his slice of lemon, and she went on with a spurt.

"Did you ever hear how she broke off being engaged to Abner Cook? Father says that was a regular climax,—whatever that is, and that he respects her perfectly tor-men-

dously for it. Father knows a great deal about everything," she ended impressively.

The captain cocked his eye at her somewhat after the fashion of Polly at her sauciest, and gave another deep chuckle.

"Let's have it, if there's nothin' spoony about it. I can't stand any soft business, you know," he warned her.

"Oh, it isn't much to tell, after all," she said. "But I'll tell it as quickly as I can. Well, Abner was very slow and set in his ways, just as set as a mule, and they were always having discussions,—fusses, you know, and Miss Carrie kept getting more and more out of patience with him."

"I know the fellow, and a poor enough sort he is for a lively woman to take out papers for," said the captain with a snort. "No git-up-and-go to him."

"But lots of money," said Beth Anne eagerly. "He gave her a great big diamond, and she was awfully proud of it. And one evening when Abner was being worse obsti-

nate than ever, and she was getting madder'n hops, she snatched off the ring and gave it back to him spang off. And Abner was so mad he flung the ring straight in the big parlor stove—right into the middle of the burning hot fire!"

"Phew! That was going some!" whistled the captain with lively enjoyment. "Did she grab it out again? Bet she was sorry enough at that."

Beth Anne tossed her head. "She just picked up the coal scuttle and poured the whole thing bang into the stove and she slammed the stove-door, and said, 'Good-evening, Mr. Cook; I guess you needn't call again.' And he didn't ever go again, not even to see about the ashes!"

"Well, I swan to man! Did she do that?" cried the captain, highly diverted. "She's one to know her mind, that woman is. Well, well,—to think of that now," and he chuckled gleefully.

Beth Anne, suppressing her glee, rose to go.

"Well, good-bye now and come again, all of you," said the captain. "Glad to see you at any time I'm in. Which reminds me of a favor I was goin' to ask," and his glance roved about the group, pausing ever so slightly on Egbert.

There was a chorus of eager offers from all the others, but Egbert, though he flushed, hesitated before joining the babel.

"I should be pleased to be of service, I am sure," he said, so ceremoniously that Beth Anne wanted to shake him.

The captain puckered his lips as he looked at Egbert. "It's just this," he said deliberately. "I'm goin' away for a spell,—a two day ja'nt up the coast,—and I've got to leave Polly at her moorings. It struck me that you are a pretty reliable lot of young people, and if any of you offered to take her in charge, my mind 'ud be a mortal sight easier'n leavin' her here with the hostler."

There was a perfect shout from the boys, and Francie chattered such promises of seclusion

and nourishment that no one else could be heard till Beth Anne nudged him and whispered, "Don't you see he wants Egbert to take her?"

Egbert knew very well what was being asked of him, and though he looked quite miserable he answered calmly, "I should be delighted to be of service to the bird, but it is quite impossible. I have never had any experience with animals in captivity."

The moment of silence that followed this stilted speech must have been painful to Egbert, for he grew very pale, but he held his head more erect than ever as Francie whispered rather audibly to Beth Anne that he was a sickening Miss Molly, and that they might as well give up any hope of doing anything with him.

The captain, however, did not seem at all ruffled. He shook hands gravely and kindly with Egbert; then he turned to the others and said cheerily:

"I'm goin' to split this here service, as our

friend Bert calls it." Beth Anne gasped at the familiar name. "I'm going to ask Frank here to take the bird, and him and Ben take care of the cage, while you girls see to her food. How's that strike you?"

It struck them as so perfect an arrangement that it was with real delight that they learned that Captain Daniel was to leave that very evening on the five-thirty, and the fascinating Polly Phemie was to be put in their charge at once.

Ben and Francie carried her over to the carriage-house, with the captain in command, and the girls received the boxes of food together with minute instructions as to the amount to be given each day.

Then the captain said good-bye; they saw his broad back disappear down the narrow wooden stairs, and they were alone with their treasure.

"Wouldn't it be fun to get Miss Carrie to help us?" said Beth Anne, mischievously.

They all knew of the encounter between the captain and Miss Carrie.

Ben stood before the big cage with his legs far apart and his head held high. "I'll tell you what," he said, emphatically. "This old parrot has got some work before her. Listen to me,—all of you."

They raised their faces from their close inspection of the strutting bird, and Beth Anne caught the look of inspiration on Ben's freckled face.

"Oh, Ben, what is it?" she cried, quivering with eager interest. "What is Polly Phemie going to do?"

Ben screwed up his lips and scowled impressively, nodding his head a great many times to pound his meaning into them.

"This old parrot looks pretty gay and warlike, doesn't she?" he declaimed tensely. "Well, it doesn't matter what she *looks* like, —she's going to be the dove of peace!"

There was a confused hubbub which Ben silenced with a magnificent gesture.

"Just wait," he said. "This bird's going to learn some new words, gentle ladylike talk,

—and then we're going to take her over to Miss Carrie's and let her spout them off and ——"

"Oh, and Miss Carrie'll think that Cap'n Dan'l taught her and she'll be friends with him!" cried Beth Anne rapturously. "Oh, Ben, you're the smartest boy in the whole world to think of such a thing."

"How are you going to make her learn them?" demanded Francie, eager to begin.

"Just keep on saying them over and over before her, and she'll say them after a while," said Jinny, alight with pleasure at this attractive scheme. "Mrs. Dill used to have a parrot, and the boys taught it all sorts of things that way."

"I'll tell you what we'll do," said Bess. "We'll take turns saying it to her all the time we aren't in school, and that ought to make her learn right off. We haven't any time to waste, you know."

This met with great approval, and Ben as promoter of the scheme claimed first right.

"But what am I going to teach her?" he asked in blank surprise at his own lack of words. "I don't know anything ladylike to say. You girls ought to make it up, anyway."

Beth Anne pranced with pleasure. "I'll tell you," she crowed. "Just keep saying, 'I'm sorry, Miss Carrie, for hurting your feelings. I'm a bad old bird and I won't do it again.'"

"Great Scott, why don't you throw in the Constitution of the United States and the dictionary besides!" cried Ben in an injured tone. "We can't teach her all that stuff in a couple of days, can we?"

There was another babel of argument and then Jinny and Bess settled the question by announcing that they thought part of Beth Anne's lengthy speech would be quite enough.

"Just say, 'Please excuse me. I'm a bad old bird,' and she'll understand what Polly means," said Bess.

"And that's easy to say and easy to learn,

too," added Jinny with her big eyes flashing with eager anticipation. "Now, do get to work, Ben, and begin. We'll each take a turn before we leave. We've lots of time before dinner."

CHAPTER XIV

CAPTAIN DAN'L'S APOLOGY

It took two whole days to teach Polly Phemie to say "Please excuse me," although she learned the last part of her speech at the second repetition from Ben, and screamed out constantly, "I'm a bad old bird. I'm a bad old bird," with such wicked enjoyment that even Francie got out of patience with her.

"She'll spoil everything,—see if she doesn't," he prophesied, frowning darkly at the headstrong pupil, who merely bit at his finger by way of comment. "She just loves to be bad, and I bet anything she'll cackle out that old 'I'm a lady' thing soon's she sees Miss Carrie. And that'll make a mess of it sure."

"It's a good thing Jinny thought of waving that little red ribbon at her each time she said the speech, though," said Beth Anne thoughtfully. "There's more chance of her saying it

right when we aren't there if she sees that ribbon at the top of her cage."

"If the stubborn old thing had learned it sooner we'd have had it all over this afternoon," said Bess in an injured tone. "Here we've given up our sports and haven't even seen the Niminy-Piminies for two days, and all for nothing. To-morrow will be Sunday, and Captain Dan'l may come any time, and all our fun will be spoiled."

A rather long and heated argument followed, and then it was settled that the cage should be taken by the boys over to the white house on the Back Road quite early the next morning before Miss Carrie should be up, and that the other members should be allowed the privilege of hiding with the two bearers in the bushes to hear how the message of reconciliation was received. Then the members parted for the night with promises of an early and secret meeting.

The sun was just rising as Beth Anne and Jinny made their escape unseen and feeling,

as Beth Anne said, like the burglarist kind of thieves, hurried to the crossroads, where they were to meet the others.

Francie's cap was on duty on a fence-post, but not a sign of any one or anything else. Beth Anne flushed with disappointment, and began to voice her vexation, when Jinny lifted the cap and discovered a paper on which was scribbled these words, "She is up, so we can't wait. Come to the syringa bush by the pear tree. Don't show yourselves.—OLD SLEUTH."

In a flutter of delightful agitation they gained the shelter of the wide spreading old syringa bush without being detected by either the occupants of the house or their fellow conspirators.

"Where's the cage?" demanded Beth Anne in such surprise that she forgot to whisper. "It isn't by the back door at all."

An angry hiss from the next bush answered her and a penetrating whisper shot back:

"Front porch. No bushes at back to hide in. S-S-Ssh!"

Sure enough, there was the big cage with its red cloth covering standing right on the immaculate porch in front of the begonia stand and just where it would catch the eye of whoever came out of the door. Beth Anne gave a sigh of relief, and then she looked dismayed.

"She'll never see it till they go to church," she whispered to Jinny. "They never use the front door so early in the morning."

"There's the milk can right on the step," Jinny whispered back eagerly. "I guess Ben must have taken it from the gate and put it there. She'll have to look for it——"

"S-S-Ssh, there she comes," breathed Beth Anne, crouching lower and hardly daring to breathe. "Oh, Jinny, she's looking for the milk can at the gate."

Jinny clutched her hand in a quiver of intense suspense. "She's looking about for it. Oh, oh!"

Beth Anne was so madly excited that she did not know where she was for the next few

minutes. She squeezed her hands over her trembling lips and watched Miss Carrie as she came back from the gate with a very puzzled expression on her pleasant face, shading her eyes from the early sunshine with one slender work-worn hand.

"Well, I declare if I know what's went with the can," she heard her say, and though the tone was mildly questioning Beth Anne felt it booming in her ears like the trumpet of judgment. Her heart beat to suffocation as she saw Miss Carrie go slowly along nipping off the dead tendrils from the woodbine on the porch pillar.

She had reached the corner of the porch and suddenly stood stock still, staring at the red covered cage with very wide open eyes.

"Land to goodness! What in the world?" she said, taking a swift step toward the cage.

Then just as suddenly she stopped again and peered about in every direction. Beth Anne had a flash of fear lest she should be searching for them, but she realized in an-

other second that it was Captain Dan'l who was expected, and she giggled under her breath at the strange expression on Miss Carrie's face. Jinny held up a finger at her to keep absolutely still, and the moment of danger passed safely. Miss Carrie turned to the porch and mounted it with a resolute step.

"Let's see what you look like, anyway, since you've come a-calling all by yourself," she said crisply, and she twitched the red cloth off the cage.

Polly stood trundling and bridling in the pale sunshine, blinking sideways at Miss Carrie and ruffling all her gorgeous feathers in a particularly self-satisfied fashion.

"Ha, ha!" she cackled harshly. "Ha, ha, ha!"

Beth Anne's heart sank. "That hateful thing isn't going to say it!" she muttered in black despair. She wished she could rush out and say the words for the traitorous Polly Phemie.

Miss Carrie stooped closer and Polly

Phemie, cocking her saucy head up at her, caught the red glint of the ribbon at the top of the cage.

"Please excuse me. I'm a bad old bird, a bad old bird, a bad old bird. Ha, ha, ha!" she shouted with ear-splitting distinctness.

Beth Anne almost tumbled down in the syringa bush. She had to catch at Jinny's arm to steady herself to see what happened next. And what she saw was really very exciting.

Miss Carrie stooped over the cage and put her fingers in between the wires and scratched Polly first on one side of the head and then on the other, and Polly seemed to enjoy it exceedingly. Then, just as the watchers were realizing that Miss Carrie had accomplished this impossible feat without being bitten or pecked at, a trap came clattering down the road, and Captain Dan'l's rosy face peered over the dashboard.

As the carriage drew nearer it was abruptly reined in with a jolt and the captain jumped

out and came quickly toward the small group on the porch. His face was flaming, and he looked so astonished that Beth Anne trembled for the success of their laborious scheme.

Miss Carrie had been so absorbed in Polly that she had not heard the wheels, but at the click of the gate she looked up with a start and saw the captain coming toward her. For just the tiniest fraction of a second she seemed to hesitate, and then stepping forward with her pleasantest smile, she held out her hand.

"I'm right pleased to see you, Cap'n Dan'l," she said with real friendliness in her tone. "It's mighty good of you to come,—I'll say that for you. And I'll tell you I'm sorry that I ever spoke sharp to you the way I did. It wasn't neighborly, and to a stranger, too. Shake hands and let bygones be bygones. I'll never forget that I didn't act hospitable to you, and I'll try to show you how much I appreciate your sending Polly to make it up. It's as cute a way of beggin' pardon as ever I saw."

During this rather long speech Captain Dan'l had turned from red to white with astonishment and then from white to red with embarrassment under the undeserved thanks for the apology which he had had no part in preparing. When Miss Carrie ended he evidently made up his mind very promptly to a totally different reply from that which he first intended.

"I'm glad you've come to find Polly Phemie good company, ma'am," he said heartily, shaking the offered hand with great cordiality. "You've made rare friends with her a'ready, I see. It ain't many she'll take to like that,—lettin' them make free with her. Should you wish for me to leave her with you till after I pay off Zay Peters? He'll be waitin' at the hotel with my traps, so I must peg along now."

Miss Carrie was not quite prepared for such wholesale reconciliation, but she adjusted herself quickly to the new situation.

"You leave her here and come back to breakfast with Angeline and me," she offered,

crisply. "We've hot cakes and some creamed chicken."

Captain Dan'l's eyes twinkled. "That sounds mighty good to me," he answered jovially. "I'll be back as soon's I wash off the dust."

Miss Carrie stood for a moment looking after him with a very peculiar expression on her face; and then she flung the cover over the cage, went hurriedly indoors with the recovered milk-can, and slammed the kitchen door behind her, leaving the parrot on the front porch.

"Let's get out and catch Captain Dan'l," whispered Jinny, and Beth Anne was swift to follow.

Ben tore past her and reached the captain just as he had given an answering "good-morning" to Jinny's breathless greeting.

"We did it, sir!" he cried. "We taught Polly the words and took her over there this morning. We didn't think you'd be back so soon."

"And Miss Carrie likes birds," added Francie, with assumed gaiety.

Their agitated chorus seemed to clear the captain's mind of the tangle. His puzzled look relaxed into one of broad good humor.

"Well, well. So you've been playin' tricks on me when my back was turned. I thought Polly flew over there cage and all by herself," he said jovially, surveying them with twinkling eyes. "What in nation made you plot out such doin's, anyway? Ain't I a peaceable enough man to do my own makin'-up, when the time was ready?"

"Oh, but you were so fearfully long about it," crowed Beth Anne. "We thought you'd never do it, so we just simply had to,—when we got such a perfectly lovely chance."

"We had a fearful time teaching Polly the speech," said Bess, eagerly. "But she said it off just as though she were a real person."

"What speech?" broke in the captain. "What are you talkin' about?"

His serious air dampened the spirits of all

save Beth Anne, who was so uplifted with the wonderful success of their labors that she didn't care a fig for minor happenings. She explained the whole matter with great cheerfulness and wound up with the request that she and Bess and Jinny might be allowed to take care of Polly once in a while when he had moved over to Angeline's.

Captain Dan'l shook his head at her and gave his deep chuckle.

"Well, well, so I'm to be run by a parcel of young snips, am I?" he said, playfully pulling one of Beth Anne's curls. "I suppose I'll have no peace of my life till I've moved in, once you've made up your mind I'm to go there. How long will you give me at the General Washington? My month ain't up till Tuesday, ma'am."

Beth Anne giggled, but before she could reply, Ben spoke.

"We're sorry if you think we've butted in, Cap'n Dan'l," he said respectfully. "We didn't mean it that way at all. We're just

having some fun, and we sort of thought you'd like it, too."

"And so I do, my boy," said the captain heartily. "So I do. I was beginnin' to think I'd have to eat that humble pie myself and go say I was sorry,—Angeline's gettin' old, you know; it's poor work fussin' with women, anyway. So you've done me a real service, and I thank you hearty for it. I'll say good-bye,—for I see Zay Peters still waitin'—and I'll see you all later. I've got somewhat to discuss, but it'll wait, it'll wait," and he hurried off, leaving them in a daze of satisfaction.

When they were about to separate at the Drake gate, Beth Anne found her voice.

"Mary says to come to the back garden tomorrow after school if it's clear," she said. "Bess is coming right after school, and you two boys just have to come. Mary wants us all."

"All right, we'll come," said Ben, as they started off down the road.

Jinny linked her arm into Beth Anne's and skipped into step.

"What is it, Beth Anne dear?" she asked coaxingly. "Something's going to happen. I know it by the way you look."

Beth Anne pursed her pink lips and shook her head. "I won't tell anybody," she announced firmly. "You just wait and see. Ben isn't the only one that has ideas. I can tell you that, Miss Jinny Randolph!"

"It won't hurt any one, will it?" asked Jinny doubtfully, thinking of Claire.

Beth Anne flushed at the memory of her pebble experiment. "Mary and I planned it," she said decisively. "And you'll simply have to wait and see."

CHAPTER XV

A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

"THEY'RE all coming," cried Beth Anne. "And—what do you think, Claire has a sweater on!"

Jinny watched the approaching group thoughtfully. "I felt sort of sorry for Egbert," she confessed. "Sometimes he seems to me as if he wanted to be jolly like us and didn't know how, and so he puts on that awful stiffness to pretend he doesn't care."

"Stuff and nonsense; he just loves to show off," said Beth Anne with easy contempt. "Mark my words, Jinny-pinny, he'll be a Niminy-Piminy all his born days."

The garden wicket clicked and they looked toward the house with a start.

"There's Mary, with the wands," cried Beth Anne excitedly. "We'll have to flop."

"Beat you down," flashed Jinny, swinging out on her branch with the ease of long practice.

Beth Anne flung herself out to the limit of her branch and with a twist that sent her vaulting through the air she landed lightly on the grass beside Jinny just as the trio from Stepping Stones reached the meadow-path gate.

"Why didn't you wear gym suits?" Beth Anne asked immediately. "Mary told you specially to wear them for the practice."

"We didn't understand," explained Geraldine loftily. "We thought it did not matter for this once. We have ordered them from Firenzi, though, and we'll have them for the next practice. We're not allowed to wear ready-made garments."

Mary, arriving opportunely, laid her bundle on the table in the pergola and sitting down on the circular stone seat, began a brief outline

of the play in which they were all to have parts, describing the various duties of the animals which they were to impersonate and making such a lively attractive picture of the whole affair that her audience was quite carried away with enthusiasm.

"Golly! I'm glad I'm going to be the kangaroo!" said Ben. "I'd a heap rather leap about all day than sit and stare like old Mr. Owl. You've got the slowest part of the whole shooting match, Egbert."

"It is very agreeable to me, I am sure," responded Egbert with studied indifference. "Miss Stone could have pleased me no better had she consulted me on the matter."

Mary smiled pleasantly at this defense of her selection. "I am so glad you all like your parts, for that is half the battle," she said. "There is always so much hard work about getting up a thing of this sort that we want every one to start in with a good will. I knew Francie would enjoy being the monkey, and Claire and Geraldine would make very sweet

gentle rabbits. Bess and Jinny will do finely as the fox and the sheep. Beth Anne, of course, has the part of the kitten because she can sing the meow song."

Beth Anne was so used to people knowing that she could sing that she had forgotten completely that the Niminy-Piminies were not aware of it, and their surprise pleased her exceedingly, while Mary's next words set her head to wagging in earnest.

"Beth Anne and I made up the play from an outline in the Nature Lover's Monthly," said Mary. "We've worked ourselves to the bone on it, and we think it's pretty good. Of course, it will depend a good deal on the costumes and the way you do your parts, but the committee for the church entertainment like it so much they've asked us to give it at the first afternoon of the Fair."

There was a murmur of approval, which Beth Anne took very much to herself.

"Weren't we awfully smart to do it without any one guessing?" she cried, jumping up to

overwhelm Jinny in a mighty hug. "We spent oceans of time on it, too. When I had my sprained ankle, and while you were practicing, Jinny-pinny. And you never dreamed we were at it, did you?"

Jinny shook her head, beaming on her beloved friend. "You're always doing something perfectly lovely," she said warmly. "I'm going to just love it because you and Mary wrote it."

Beth Anne turned to Egbert and Geraldine while the others clustered eagerly about Mary discussing their parts in the play.

"You see, I knew all about it," she boasted. "I knew you'd need gym suits for the kangaroo dance and the monkey drill."

Then she realized how far she was at this very moment from that loving kindness and unselfishness which her mother had enjoined upon her. Impulsively she put out a contrite hand.

"Oh, I'm sorry I was snippy," she said gently. "I didn't want to be so horrid,

really-for-truly I didn't. I'm always forgetting the rule."

Egbert's dark eyes softened as he took her hand and shook it gravely.

"What rule do you mean?" asked Egbert in an undertone as they joined the others.

Beth Anne hesitated. "Oh, perhaps I'll tell you some day," she evaded skilfully, and then a guilty memory of her impressive words to Jinny recurred to her, and she added, "Perhaps you'll never want to know. You'd have to be able to do lots of things before that,—running and swimming and all that. I guess you'd think it was a silly little thing, anyway."

She left him gravely considering this mysterious speech and it was not until they were all taking their positions for the kangaroo dance that he spoke to her again.

"I'm going to know about that rule you mentioned," he said with quiet insistence. "I've made up my mind to it fully and I intend to have you tell me."

Beth Anne shook back her curls with a careless gesture. "Don't be too sure you're going to do it," she said lightly. "You've a long way to go before any of the club will —— Oh, dear, I almost told!" she cried. "That's the second mistake I've made this afternoon," and she broke off again in real dismay at herself.

Egbert looked at her critically as he followed her lead in the march that led to the dance. "I'm not asking you to tell me now," he reassured her. "I prefer to wait till everything is opportune. One month from to-day I shall repeat my request."

"And I shan't answer you, I'm perfectly sure of that!" cried Beth Anne, annoyed at his persistence.

"Oh, yes you will," he replied as he swung sedately into place for the first steps of the dance. "I shall arrange matters so that you will be entirely willing to enlighten me."

Beth Anne was too vexed to trust herself to speak to him again, and the difficulties of the

lively dance kept them all fully absorbed until the clang of the farm bell across the meadow called a halt in their practice.

"Mercy, it's six o'clock!" cried Mary in surprise. "The time has simply galloped away. You've done beautifully to-day and you must be tired to death. Can you all come to-morrow afternoon? We haven't much time for practice, you know, and we simply must do it perfectly or Beth Anne and I will not be able to look that committee in the face."

Bess and the boys understood that Mary's gay manner covered a confident purpose and they were quick to promise, but Geraldine looked very dubious while Claire eyed her anxiously.

Beth Anne guessed the difficulty just as Jinny spoke. "I'll lend you my old gym suit," she offered. "It'll just about fit you nicely."

"And you can have mine for to-morrow, Claire," cried Beth Anne happily. "I can

miss a day better than you can. I know it all, anyway."

Geraldine did not refuse Jinny's offer, although it was plain she would have liked to decline if Mary Stone had not shown her quick approval by nodding brightly to the two Van Meters and saying with a breath of relief:

"That will be just the thing. You can't do the monkey drill very gracefully in ordinary dresses. Come over early, and I'll fit you out with them before the girls get home from school. That will save time, as we'll have to cut out the costumes afterward."

"May we have our parts and the description of our costumes now?" asked Egbert as they started to leave. "I should like to understand more fully what is required."

"Of course you may," said Mary with a little laugh. "I forgot to tell you that I had them ready for each of you there on the table in the pergola."

As the others rushed to secure the budgets of sheets that belonged to them Claire slipped close to Beth Anne, wriggling into her new sweater as she came.

Beth Anne put out a helping hand, and settled Claire's collar into place. "It's a perfectly sweet color, Claire. I'm so glad you have it," she said genially. "You seem more like real live people now."

Claire nodded. "I am getting more robuster," she boasted, quite in Beth Anne's own fashion. "I can run half around the garden now without stopping. And I'll tell you a secret if you'll promise not to let Gerry or Egbert know."

Beth Anne vowed eagerly, and Claire put her lips to her ear and whispered dramatically:

"I'm climbing trees! On the sly! Nobody knows but the under gardener. He boosts me up when I get stuck."

Beth Anne clapped her hands with real delight. "Oh, Claire, I knew you'd do it!"

she cried warmly. "I knew you'd beat them all!"

"S-Sh, they'll hear you," warned Claire with an alarmed glance around. "They wouldn't let me do it, you know. Remember, you're not to tell, or I'll have to stop it. Gerry's ever so strict and ladylike. I heard about your teaching the parrot, and I wish I could have helped. It must have been such fun. I just love birds and things, but Miss Simpkins is afraid for us to have pets."

Beth Anne opened her eyes wide. "So *that* was why Egbert didn't want to take care of Polly while the captain was gone?" she said. "I thought he hated her."

"Oh, we never have pets,—they're so full of germs," said Claire, resignedly. "Gladys Sands got typhoid from rabbits that were infected, and Cousin Lucy knew a girl who died of hydrophobia."

This was a puzzling point of view. "But she certainly wants you to be strong and healthy," she said decisively. "We'll get

your muscle up and make you real good and strengthy, and when she sees how much weller you are than the others she'll be perfectly crazy to have them made into Really-for-trulys, too."

Claire opened her mouth to question, but Egbert and Geraldine were starting for home and called imperatively, and Claire ran off to meet them at the meadow-path gate, while Beth Anne hurried to join the others, only too glad that Claire had not been able to ask her question.

Bess and the boys had gone and Jinny was helping Mary take the wands and papers back to the house. Beth Anne danced up and flung an arm about each.

"Oh, isn't it coming out splendidly!" she bubbled. "We're getting along faster than ever!"

Mary, whose mind was on the rehearsal, smiled assent, but Jinny caught the meaning look and understood that there was other news, and so as soon as they had put away

the parcels and Mary had started for a flying consultation with Mrs. Drake before dinner, she said eagerly to Beth Anne :

"Come out to the whispering tree, and tell me all about it."

CHAPTER XVI

A CANDIDATE FOR THE GROW STRAIGHT CLUB

BETH ANNE'S report of Claire's progress toward being a Really-for-truly was received with great enthusiasm by Jinny.

"She'll soon be ready to be a G. S. C. if she keeps on," she said exultingly. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could get her into the club before the next Gym meeting! And have her do something easy to surprise them!"

Beth Anne almost bounced off of her branch in her delight at this clever idea. "That's just what we'll do!" she crowed. "We'll have a club meeting before school to-morrow and tell them about it, and then we'll all think hard to make up something that will do for Claire's initiation. Oh, won't it be fun!"

"Let's go 'phone before Mary gets back,"

suggested Jinny, slipping down from her seat in the crotch. "She'll be back soon. Dinner's nearly ready."

They got Bess and the boys in turn and managed to arrange a meeting before school without revealing the object. Beth Anne felt that they were growing very wise and subtle to practice such restraint. Her diary showed only a brief paragraph that night,—"We had fun practicing for the play. Something very stupendeous has happened. Claire has gotten over being a N. P. and we are going to make her into a G. S. C. if the rest of the club will do it. I am glad I have helped Claire. It makes me feel very clam and happy."

Then she wrote her motto of "Others First" in very large letters over the top of the page for the next day and closed the book and shoved it into its hiding-place with a satisfied wag of her head. She had forgotten all about the play and her pride in her own performance in the absorbing interest in Claire's promotion to the rank of Really-for-truly,—

which shows that the new club had done as much for her as it had for the Niminy-Piminies.

The meeting next morning was a lively one. Ben and Francie were for having Claire brought into the club without further delay, so that she might begin private practice for her Saturday stunts. Beth Anne had a decided leaning toward this rapid method of procedure, but was finally won over to the other side by Bess's argument that if they took her into membership so easily she might not think it so much of an honor.

"Besides, we haven't any chance to initiate her till Thursday," said Jinny. "We have to rehearse for the play, you know."

This was felt to be a clincher, and there was a discouraged silence until Francie broke it by piping out jubilantly:

"I know what we can do! We can get her into shape by that time dead easy!"

Without being urged he put forth his plan, and it met with such warm approval that he

grew very dictatorial. "Beth Anne, you'll have to hint about the club just enough to make her bite," he said arrogantly. "We'll fix up three tests for her to do before Thursday and if she makes good we'll have the initiation in our Gym. You girls'll have to teach her something easy for Saturday. Ben and I'll plan out the tests at recess to-day."

Beth Anne wanted to argue, but the school bell clanged and the meeting broke up so abruptly that she had only time to call after Ben as the boys hurried off:

"Don't let him choose anything hard, Ben. She can't stand much, you know."

As the girls formed into line she said scornfully to Bess who was next, "Francie is so silly about his old ideas. He just loses his head over them, and they aren't worth two pins—generally."

"Oh, he isn't so bad," said Bess, pacifically. "He helped us out of the hole, anyway. We can vote the tests down if they don't suit us, you know."

But the tests, when they were submitted at noon, were found to be quite tame enough to satisfy even Beth Anne's critical taste. The first trial Claire was to endure was merely to run to Miss Carrie's and inquire for Beth Anne's hair ribbon, which had been lost on Sunday's secret expedition, and might be now in Miss Carrie's possession.

The second was to climb the whispering tree by herself, and the third was to wade across the Ripple at its shallowest part and put on her shoes and stockings afterward unaided by towel, button-hook or human helper.

After these had been duly voted on and entered temporarily by the secretary in the fly-leaf of her geography the club adjourned for the afternoon session, all agreeing to do their utmost at the rehearsal to lure Geraldine and Egbert into following their younger sister's lead.

The nature play rehearsal went very briskly. The five were in the highest spirits

and Claire was quite as gay as any, for Beth Anne had dropped mysterious hints of the honors that awaited her if she made good as a real healthy out-of-door girl. Geraldine, too, seemed less starched than usual,—the bloomer suit with her own beautiful scarf and sash was so becoming that she quite forgot that it had not been made by some famous dressmaking firm especially for her. Egbert alone was reserved and distant.

"He looks like he's planning something, too," whispered Ben to Beth Anne as they were lining up for the kangaroo dance.

"Pooh, he's just thinking up big words to paralyze us with," retorted Beth Anne with a sparkle. "He hasn't a real live idea in his glumpy old head. Claire's going to run over to Miss Carrie's after we're through to-day," she added, gleefully.

Ben passed the word about, and the club outdid itself in its endeavors to please Mary and so shorten the time of practice. They had their reward in Mary's gratitude and in

being dismissed a full half hour earlier than they had expected.

Geraldine and Egbert wanted to take Claire home with them, as usual, and if Claire had been left to herself she would have been forced to leave without fulfilling her promise to Beth Anne. Bess, however, came to the rescue in the nick of time and, with the promise of seeing Claire safely home before dark, carried her off to see Francie's rabbits.

"Egbert looked awfully queer, didn't he?" said Jinny as the rest of the club sped around the back way to the meeting place they had planned. "I suppose he thought rabbits were more for boys than for girls ——"

"Stuff and nonsense," interrupted Beth Anne. "He couldn't expect us to ask him, after he refused Polly Phemie. There's Claire just going off around the corner. Oh, dear, we've missed her!"

They stood in the shelter of the shrubberies at Drakes' side entrance and watched Claire speeding along at a pretty fair rate for a

newly reclaimed Niminy-Piminy. She turned into Miss Carrie's trim gate, and was lost to sight in such a short time that Beth Anne was still grumbling at having missed the start, when she came flying out again.

The red ribbon was in her hand, and as she caught sight of them, she waved it at them.

"She's got it, all rightie," said Ben, admiringly. "Bet she finishes ahead of time, too, Pank."

Francie, who held his dollar watch in his hand, gave a pompous nod.

"She'll finish in five," he announced as she passed the watering trough of the General Washington, and the club began a pantomime of clapping and waving in applause of Claire's first success.

Claire panted into their midst with such shining eyes and stammering efforts at speech that Francie commanded instant attention. "Take it easy, Claire," he said eagerly, forgetting his airs of importance. "Take your time. We can wait."

"Were you frightened by anything, dear?" asked Bess, who was used to quieting the fears of her own little sisters.

Claire accepted the caressing arm, although she did not seem to need it. Then she straightened herself stiffly as though gathering her strength for a mighty effort. "I am not frightened," she said clearly and slowly. "I got the ribbon from Captain Daniel. He's living there now."

There was a perfect babel of excited questions, to all of which Claire could only repeat what she had said and they had to be content with that meager fact for the present.

"Now we can go and see Polly Phemie any time we wish," said Beth Anne happily as they walked home from Stepping Stones talking it over. "And if Claire and Geraldine will only be nice and sociable to Miss Carrie they may go, too."

Bess interposed hastily: "Egbert and Geraldine just said they didn't care for our rough

ways and that they weren't coming to any more of our Gym parties."

This was a real bomb. Beth Anne and Jinny felt a shock at this upsetting of their cherished plans. That the Niminy-Piminies should revolt and prefer to stay away from the jolly times at the Gym had never entered their heads. They gasped with astonishment.

"Why, the silly things!" cried Beth Anne hotly. "How dare they talk like that? I'll never ask them to another thing. I wish they weren't in the nature play."

Jinny showed more control, but her dark eyes flashed. "I think it's awfully mean of them to feel that way," she said in a quiet tone. "We've been as nice as any one could be to them, too, and they've been so limp!"

Bess sighed and then smiled. "I don't care much," she confessed. "If Egbert and Geraldine are going to keep on being so fussy and afraid of out-of-door things, we're well rid of them."

This sentiment was echoed by the boys when

the news was broken to them at school the next day.

"Don't you fret, they'll be sorry enough when they see what good times Claire has with us," predicted Ben with his ready confidence. "We aren't going out of business as a club just because two scary rabbits of city children don't like our ways."

"Claire says Egbert hates to be told how to do things," said Bess thoughtfully. "I do believe that's the reason he's cross with us. We've rushed him too much."

"Well, his chance of ever being a G. S. C. is over now," said Francie with a tinge of regret in his tone. As general manager he felt a personal loss in dropping two of the chief problems of the club's Saturday meetings. "He'll go a long way before he meets anybody who'll be as careful of his precious health and his precious self as we were. Why, we've never even asked him to go wading yet, for fear he'd catch cold."

Claire came to the next test with her usual

composed air. The desertion of the other two members of her family did not seem to affect her interest in the plans for the Gym meetings and she actually beamed at the promise of a larger part on the program than had at first been given her, and when the five started with her for the second test she fairly skipped with eagerness, keeping step with Beth Anne's quick gait.

"Don't rush her," cautioned Jinny. "She'll do better if she goes slowly. Shan't you, Claire?"

Claire laughed as she started for the tree.

"I am not in a hurry," she said calmly. "This is an easy tree. I have climbed much harder ones at home."

The boys stood eager to catch her if she faltered, but she went swiftly up the gnarled old trunk and without the least difficulty gained the wide crotches where Beth Anne and Jinny usually sat. Then she turned and, swinging herself down by her hands, she dropped to the turf.

"MY, BUT IT FEELS GOOD!"

"I can't fly out in the air as you can," she said to Beth Anne when the rustle of excitement over this surprising feat had subsided. "I'm going to do it, though, before long."

Francie consulted his watch. "Three minutes for the second test," he announced briskly. "Now, we'll see how long it takes you to wade over the shallows, Claire. You ought to do it in less than that."

They all trooped out of the meadow-gate and, passing the nibbling sheep, crept under the barbed wire fence that separated the meadow from the brook pasture.

Bess superintended the test, and Claire soon had her shoes and stockings off and was standing on the sloping bank, wriggling her white toes into the warm moist earth.

"My, but it feels good!" she said. "I didn't know it was anything like this!"

Ben beamed on her. "You're the good old sport, all rightie," he encouraged her. "You'll like it in the water, see if you don't!"

Claire walked down the slope and tiptoed out on the pebbles.

"Jiminy, but they're lumpy!" she cried, squirming a bit, as she went on, splashing through the shallow pools and avoiding the stepping stones.

Beth Anne nudged Jinny. "Did you hear that?" she whispered. "She said 'Jiminy.' Oh, gor-acious me, wouldn't Egbert be ashamed of her now!"

Jinny was peering down the willow-bordered stretch of meadow where the little brook wandered among its pebbles. She seemed to be staring at a particular clump of elder bushes that were just coming into leaf.

Beth Anne followed her gaze and then she jumped up and down in great excitement.

"There's Egbert, down by the pool!" she cried. "You've finished just in time, Claire! See, there he is!"

CHAPTER XVII

ODDS AND ENDS

BETH ANNE'S cry turned all eyes in the direction of her pointing finger.

"Where is he?" demanded Ben, peering from under his hand toward the shadows of the pool. "I don't see anybody."

"Well, he's there, anyway. Isn't he, Jinny?" retorted Beth Anne, positively. "Come on down and see, if you don't believe me."

She raced off skirting the willows and making the circuit of the big boulder, followed closely by all save Claire, who dropped down on the grassy bank and began scrambling into her shoes and stockings.

"You'll see when we get there," panted Beth Anne as Ben ran beside her. "He's just behind these elder bushes."

The elder bushes flung their green reflec-

tions into the quiet pool and a cat-bird meowed above their heads in the sunny stillness, but there was no sign of any human boy in sight when they broke through the screen of elders and stood staring about them in blank bewilderment.

"Gee, but you're some dreamer, Beth Anne!" Ben laughed. "You'd better wake up. You saw a chipmunk, and thought it was our darling Eggie."

"She'll be seeing Geraldine up in the big pine next," jeered Francie, tapping the trunk of the tall tree that stood sentinel over the low-bending willows of the brook.

Beth Anne flushed with indignation at their teasing. "I did see him," she asserted hotly. "I'd know his black hair anywhere."

Jinny stooped to the muddy shore. "See here," she said, excitedly. "Here are footprints, just like Robinson Crusoe!"

When the footprints were declared to be of the right size for Egbert's tracks, Beth Anne's head waggled triumphantly.

"I knew it!" she boasted. "I've perfectly wonderful eyes for seeing far-away things. I knew I was right."

"Where in the world has he gone?" asked Bess, poking about the bushes as though she expected to find Egbert in some rabbit-hole.

"Must have had an air-ship and flown off while we were chasing around the big boulder," said Ben. "He isn't here,—that's plain. We may as well go back and start in with the Gym drill for Claire and the girls. There's no use poking about here all day."

They filed back in puzzled argument over Egbert's mysterious disappearance, and found Claire with her shoes and stockings on.

"I'm going to see Miss Carrie straight off, anyway," she announced firmly. "I'll be back before you've started," and she was off before any one could stop her.

She was as good as her word, however, and came dancing up the stair and into the big Gym before the arguments that always went before any Gym practice had subsided.

"What do you think?" she cried, flinging off her sweater and shaking back her curls in great excitement. "Cap'n Dan'l was there! He has given Polly Phemie to Miss Carrie for her very own! And she says we girls are to teach her some new speeches right away."

The chorus of surprise was not without some protest from the boys.

"I like that," said Francie. "We slaved over that old parrot twice as hard as you girls."

"Cap'n Dan'l has gone to live there," went on Beth Anne wagging her head. "He moved in yesterday, just when his month was up at the hotel. And Miss Carrie says that he says that he's going to believe in Peace Conferences all his life, since ours did so much for him."

"Humph!" said Ben. "I didn't think he was so fond of primpy ways. Miss Carrie won't let him smoke that old pipe of his indoors, I bet you. She always chases John A. into the wood-shed when he's visiting there."

"Indeed, Cap'n Dan'l was smoking in the sitting-room and Miss Carrie was sitting there sewing, too!" cried Beth Anne, delighted to defend her old friend so easily. "I guess she wants to be nice to him, as she promised when they shook hands on Sunday. Angeline is awfully pleased, and she says you're as peart as a possum to be thinking up such clever doings."

Ben colored, much pleased at this tribute, and Beth Anne was quick to add, "She's asked you all to come see the captain any time you please, too, and he said you boys were to go fishing with him the first time he goes."

Francie and Ben both grew quite cheerful at this, and the attention of the club returned to the matter in hand. The simple drill went on successfully and at the end of the time limit which Bess had set, they were able to steer Claire through the evolutions without a break.

"There now," said Ben as they locked the door behind them. "We're pretty safe to

show Claire off on Saturday, even if she hasn't another chance to practice. What about the initiation, Jinny? We'll have it to-morrow sure, you know."

"We'll be ready after school in the back garden," replied Jinny. "Bess and I will meet Claire in the meadow and bring her over. Don't forget your part, Francie. You know what you're to do."

Francie promised gaily and they parted in the best of spirits, Bess as usual seeing Claire to the entrance of Stepping Stones and then walking back part way with the girls.

"Mary promised me a sort of spread," said Beth Anne. "It's Mother's birthday, you know. Mary's so sorry she has to go to town, but she's given us leave to have cake and lemonade and stuff in the pergola, so we'll be able to celebrate, even if Mother is so far away."

"It'll come in splendidly for the initiation," said Bess heartily. "It's wonderful, isn't it, how things seem to fall right in

line with all of our wants, ever since we've started this club."

"I wish we knew what Egbert was up to," said Jinny as they reached the meadow-gate. "I believe he has something on his mind. He looks so different now. Sort of waked up and—and ——"

"Pooh, that's your own eyes, Jinny Randolph," laughed Beth Anne. "You're seeing double. He looks just the same old Niminy-Piminy to me. What could he be doing down there at the pool, anyway?"

Jinny looked puzzled. "I don't know," she confessed. "Unless he was finding out things for himself, as he said he'd rather."

Beth Anne gave a sniff of contempt. "Spying on us, more than likely," she said lightly. "Claire's the only one of them that will amount to a row of pins, mark my words."

Mary Stone was waving to them from the garden, where she was putting some seeds into the borders, and Beth Anne's face lighted with happy expectation.

"She wants us for something!" she cried. "Oh, how lovely!"

Bess and Jinny followed and all three stopped at the border, breathless with interest, but Mary's face, seen closer, did not promise what they had hoped.

"I have a piece of news for you," she said, rubbing the damp earth from her fingers as she rose. "I'm afraid you will be rather disappointed to know that we can't give the nature play this spring. The Fair is postponed till fall on account of Mrs. Lathrop's illness,—she has been overworking and has broken down and must go away for a couple of months. So the committee have decided to wait till she comes back to give the Fair."

There was a murmur of subdued regret. None of the girls felt more disappointed than Beth Anne, whose part in making the play entitled her to a larger share than the others. It was hard to have the only thing in which she excelled wiped off the slate so completely.

She had a swift throb of regret that her triumph over the really clever Egbert had been so short-lived. Then, as she gulped down the rising tears, a sudden memory of her best comforter rose like a flash before her and she saw her mother's sweet face and heard her clear voice saying once again, "It's the loving-kindness that makes it all worth while," and in that flash her own selfish vexation withered and she managed to say in a rather husky voice:

"Never mind, Mary dear. It'll be more fun. Maybe Mother'll be home then, and that will be twice as nice."

Mary saw the struggle that was going on in her heart, and she patted her shoulder kindly.

"We shall find plenty of pleasant things to fill in the time with," she said brightly. "I've just been asking Mrs. Drake about having one of our old time picnics as soon as we can arrange it. The ground is pretty dry now and the leaves are out enough to make it seem almost like real summer. So the first

warm day we have, we'll go down to Dark Hollow once again."

Beth Anne's tears were checked now in earnest. After the first flare of regret for the play was over she saw how infinitely much more pleasure there would be in it for her if her father and mother were able to be at the performance. And the picnic at Dark Hollow promised much to her.

"May we ask Claire?" she demanded.

"Of course," replied Mary, taking up her trowel again. "I expected you to have them all. I am going to see Miss Simpkins to-morrow, and I'll arrange all that for you. Now run along and let me finish my planting, or I'll be late for dinner, and that will never do."

The three danced off readily enough chattering away as happily as though there were no such things as postponements in the world. They even forgot that the Niminy-Piminies were in revolt.

As Bess said good-bye Beth Anne said gaily,

"Now mind, four o'clock at the pergola. You'll be on time for sure."

And Bess called back: "Certain sure. Initiations don't come every day to the G. S. C. I'll be there!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE NEW MEMBER

It was precisely four o'clock when Bess and Jinny ushered Claire into the pergola.

Beth Anne sat in her chair of state beside Ben at the head of the table, while Francie perched sedately on the stone seat, looking so serious and dignified that Claire's heart sank and she stammered a little as she said good-afternoon to the assembly.

Beth Anne and the boys nodded without speaking and Bess led Claire to the chair which had been placed for her at the other end of the curved seat. Then Jinny and Bess seated themselves beside Francie, and there was a moment of impressive silence.

"The meeting is now opened," said Ben, tapping three times on the table with the

gavel,—a long, well polished ham-bone which Francie had insisted on adding to the impressiveness of the ceremony. "Is Claire Van Meter present?"

Claire promptly stood up, and with a shiver at the grisly bone, she answered faintly, "Yes, if you please."

Ben puckered his lips and frowned judicially over the next question: "What is your name?"

Claire felt a bit easier at this and replied more briskly: "Claire Ormsby Van Meter."

"Are you married or single?" demanded Ben, following the list that Francie and he had concocted from Mr. Drake's law-book and the prayer-book, and keeping one finger tip on the place as he looked up.

"S-S-Single, if you p-please," faltered Claire, very much disconcerted by this unusual catechism.

"Are you willing to renounce the pomps and vanities of fashion and behave like a regular girl so far as in you lies?" read on

Ben, with infinite enjoyment of the pompous phrases.

"I hope so, I'm sure," returned Claire dubiously.

"Do you, to the best of your knowledge and belief, propose to lead a new and muscular life, abstaining from all false doctrine, fussiness, and nonsense?" demanded Ben.

"Y-Yes, of course, if I can," said Claire, very much bewildered by the flowing words. "I—I don't know much about doctrine."

"Never mind answering back till I'm all through," said Ben in a stage whisper, and then in his judicial tone he asked, with a long look at the list, "Are you willing to wear sweaters, sneakers, gym suits and plain clothes whenever and wherever you may be apprehended for sport, play or practice with the members of this aforesaid and undersigned club?"

Claire took a deep breath before saying meekly, "I guess so."

It was plain she could not follow the mean-

ing through the mazes of legal-sounding words, but as Beth Anne said afterward, it did not matter much, anyway.

"Do you purpose as member of the aforesaid and undersigned club to be faithful to all your duties as member of the aforesaid and undersigned club, by learning to swim, skate, ride and otherwise act like a member of the aforesaid and undersigned club?"

Claire agreed eagerly to this. "I'm going to do it all," she said earnestly.

Ben looked down the list with an impatient air. "You've made it awfully long, Francie," he complained. "It'll take ages to get to the real part. Beth Anne says Car'line won't wait a minute after half-past four."

"I vote we skip the rest," cried Bess, and there was a clamor of assent, which drowned Francie's protests.

Beth Anne's turn had now come.

"Now then, Claire Ormsby Van Meter, step out into the middle of the floor," said the vice-president with relish. "Mr. Benja-

min Cox Williams, please begin the second part of the initiation."

Claire looked hopefully at Ben, whose wide grin suggested nothing very alarming, but when he rose and commanded her to roll up her right sleeve, her look changed.

"Now double up your fist and make a muscle," said Ben, testing the small arm with practiced skill.

"How does she come out?" asked Beth Anne in her official character, though she knew very well the sort of muscle poor Claire possessed. "The secretary will please enter it in the record."

"Soft,—soft as the dickens," declared Ben. "You'll have to promise to harden up, if you're going to belong to this club."

Claire promised earnestly, and Ben proceeded to measure her chest expansion and count her heart beats, why, no one knew save that Ben insisted on it. Then came Francie with another lot of questions as to Claire's knowledge and willingness for gym work,

and then Bess and Jinny each were given the choice of a final test for the candidate.

Jinny chose the simple trial of running three times about the pergola without stopping, which Claire accomplished with scornful ease. And then Bess proposed the swinging drop from the whispering tree as her choice.

"Oh, that's not fair. It's too hard——" began Beth Anne, when a look from Bess silenced her.

She watched Claire go swiftly up the tree, swing out on the branch, and, with the whirl that sent her flying, drop down on the turf by the pergola, and her heart swelled with real pride and pleasure in this very apt pupil of the Grow Straights.

"Claire, you're a perfect darling, and we'll vote you in right away," she cried when the applause had subsided. "The secretary will please put down the name of Miss Claire Ormsby Van Meter. And now you're a really-for-truly Grow Straight. Oh, aren't

you fearfully glad!" and she flung the bone out into the garden and rushed to embrace the new member with all her might.

Claire gurgled and stammered her pleasure as best she could for the congratulations that the club now offered her, but there was a little pucker on her brow, and when they were quieter again she turned to Beth Anne with a rather reluctant air.

"Didn't you say there were three sections to the initiation?" she asked. "I've had only two."

There was a riotous burst at this speech and Ben, pointing to the back porch, where Car'line could be seen coming out with a tray, cried gleefully:

"There's the third part, Claire! Guess you won't find that too hard for you!"

None of them found it very hard to dispose of the good things that Car'line, followed by the smiling George, served to them in the pretty pergola. Ben's official table made a fine banquet board, and the club, now num-

bering six members, could be just comfortably seated about it, a happy party.

Car'line beamed on them and loaded their plates with goodies, keeping George busy hurrying back to the kitchen for supplies. The late sun sparkled over their hair and faces with a pleasant light, and flung a gay little flutter of violet shadows from the expanding leaves of the wistaria that twined about the pillars.

Beth Anne cuddled up to Car'line's arm as she was filling her glass with a delicious fruity beverage. "Mother'd love to be here, wouldn't she, Caddy?" she asked, lapsing into her baby name for her old nurse. "I wonder if she's thinking about us now. I feel as if she were right here."

"Aren't they coming soon?" asked Claire with hopeful interest. "I heard Miss Stone tell Cousin Lucy that they'd changed their plans, and might start sooner."

"Oh, yes, they're coming sooner than they first said," replied Beth Anne, "but they

won't be here till 'way late in June. It's a terribly long while to wait. I wish they could be here for the picnic, but there's no hope of that."

Claire watched the cloud dimming the bright face, and she slipped a timid arm about Beth Anne.

"You've got Miss Stone and Jinny and—and—and me," she said softly. "We'll try to be awfully jolly and make you have a good time, anyway."

Beth Anne flung her arms about her. "You're the dearest thing," she said, warmly. "You've been a perfect treat to-day, and I know you're going to get skilfuller and skilfuller all the time."

"Are Egbert and Geraldine coming to the picnic, Claire?" asked Jinny.

Claire nodded. "They're invited, and Cousin Lucy has accepted for them, but they don't know it yet. They were out when Cousin Lucy told me about it. They are always out now, prowling around by them-

selves. Cousin Lucy says she couldn't stand it if Father hadn't expressly told her to let us all run wild this summer. She says ——"

Beth Anne had a sudden inspiration. "I do believe Egbert's trying to find out things for himself," she cried, clapping her hands. "And Geraldine's going with him, because she's his special chum. Oh, what fun! We've made them want to be Really-for-trulys in spite of themselves!"

"Don't you be too sure, Miss Wisdom," said Francie. "They may be just moping about somewhere. Egbert goes over to Uncle John's library a lot, and he may take Geraldine there with him."

Bess agreed. "He's not bound to be out-of-doors just because he isn't in the house, you know," she said carelessly. "You may as well think Captain Dan'l is in it, too. He has been great friends with Egbert lately."

"Stuff and nonsense," retorted Beth Anne energetically. "Captain Dan'l is always pottering about in the garden and taking walks

with Miss Carrie nowadays. Egbert isn't with him all the time, is he, Claire?"

Claire shook her head till her bobbed hair flew about her ears. "He's in the summer-house a great deal," she said. "Mr. Dalton is giving us all botany, but Egbert's taking extra lessons."

Ben broke in with decision: "He's merely collecting specimens,—that's it. I bet that's what he was after down at the pool last week."

"That's it, you may be sure," said Francie, disposing of the question with a coolness which was particularly irritating to Beth Anne.

"Oh, you may all say I'm wrong," she flashed, "but I'll find out,—see if I don't. I'll show you that you're all very much mistaken. Come on, Claire, it's time for you to go home, and I want to talk to you by yourself."

Claire followed her quickly, after a hurried good-bye to the others, and Beth Anne kissed her affectionately as she opened the meadow-gate.

"You've been such a dear," she said warmly. "You'll help me now,—won't you? Jinny thinks as I do,—I can tell by the way she looks, but she can't help much. You're just the one to get at the puzzle."

Claire promised eagerly and they walked across the meadow, talking earnestly together.

CHAPTER XIX

NO NEWS IS GOOD NEWS

BETH ANNE was so used to having things go smoothly for the Grow Straight Club that she felt very badly used when after school on Friday Claire ran over to the Gym to tell them that her father had sent for them all to join him in town for a few days' stay.

"I'm sorry we have to go, but we've some clothes and things Miss Simpkins wants us to get," said Claire, looking wistfully at the preparations already begun for the next day. "We shan't be back for days and days, and I'll miss my physical exercises dreadfully."

"Never mind, you'll make them up," said Jinny comfortably. "You can do some stunts in your room, you know."

Beth Anne brightened a little at this, and as she said her hasty good-bye she warned Claire

to be on the lookout for chances to observe Egbert and Geraldine.

"See if they seem to miss the country at all. You know you can prowl around the sporting-goods departments and talk up the best kinds of racquets and mallets and all that," she called after her as Claire hurried off.

"There, we shan't have a thing on our minds now for a perfect age," Bess said as they watched Claire flying home across the meadows by the back way. "I can't say I'm overwhelmed with grief, for I've a regular Mount Ararat of stockings that have been simply howling to be darned ——"

"We'll help," broke in Jinny eagerly. "We've kept you from darning them by having such a lot of afternoon stunts, and we ought to pay up for it."

"Sure thing," said Ben heartily. "Francie and I are dandy sewers,—we'll race you with them."

Bess laughed, but insisted on seeing some samples of their skill before she would con-

sent. "Mother's pretty particular," she said, "and I like neat darning myself. You'll just draw it up in a knot and sew it over and over."

The boys fairly snorted at this accusation.

"You think we can't do it well enough for you?" demanded Ben with some sharpness. "Turn around, Francie, and show them what we can do."

Francie wheeled about and displayed a large carefully mended barn-door on the back of his trousers. "That's the sort we do," he crowed over his shoulder at them. "We're some darners, even if we aren't girls!"

"You see Mrs. Drake's more particular than your mother, Bess," Ben explained gravely. "And when we get torn up we don't like to make her feel worried and all that, so we just sit down with our old thimble and we darn away like the dickens. We've learned to do it well, haven't we?"

Bess confessed that they were ahead of her, and cheerfully gave in to Francie's proposal

that they devote Saturday afternoon to a stocking race, the winners to be treated to ice-cream out of the club treasury. No one could see why this agreeable arrangement should not be made, so they chose sides at once. Ben and Francie were to be pitted against Bess and Jinny, with Beth Anne as timekeeper and referee, since she was such a notably poor darner that she would only handicap the race.

After a morning spent in practicing exercises and drawing maps for Monday's geography lesson, the darning contest was good enough fun. Beth Anne kept time as best she could by the Gym clock, an old wreck which Francie had reclaimed from the dump and for which he was always promising to buy an hour hand with his next week's allowance.

The girls won, much to Ben's disgust, and it took fully ten minutes' argument to make the feminine part of the club see that treating only the successful members ought to be against the principles of any unselfish organi-

zation that stood for good times all around. Beth Anne, who was not included in the winning side, finally won the day by saying that it looked queer anyway for the treasurer and secretary to go spending the club money all by themselves.

Jinny brought the necessary amount from the bank in the old play-room, and they filed off to Mrs. Horn's in very good spirits.

There was no one in the low-ceiled parlor, and they chose their tables with a good deal of good-natured wrangling, while Mrs. Horn smiled indulgently on them as she took their orders.

"I hear the new people are goin' to stay quite a spell in town," she said sociably as she brought in the black tin tray with its burden of pink and brown ice-cream and thick frosty tumblers of water. "Manda says they ain't plannin' to come back for more'n a fortnight. She's mighty glad to get her garden planted, I can tell ye. They keep her good and busy sewin' and darnin' for 'em, but she's glad of

the holiday just now,—bein' plantin' time and all."

The G. S. C. looked at each other in some slight disappointment. It seemed that the Van Meters were more desirable now that they were out of reach. Beth Anne felt her solution of the problem of Egbert's secret occupation slipping from her, and was glad that Claire had promised to write of all that happened.

Mrs. Horn warmed to their eager questions. "Yes," she went on, as she served them with the shining nickel spoons. "Manda likes it pretty well there now, though it was a bit stiff for her at first. The children, you know, were almighty queer,—jest like little grown-ups they were. Manda says they made her heart ache for 'em. But lands sakes, she gets more intrusted in 'em every day. That there Egbert boy, he's a caution. He's quiet as a possum, but he's the brain of a chipmunk. Manda says he's up to everything. Learnin' to fish and ——"

Just at this interesting point a call came for Mrs. Horn and she bustled out, leaving a bubble of excited comment behind her.

"What did I tell you?" crowed Beth Anne jubilantly. "I knew he was doing something. I told you so! I told you so!"

"Aw, well, don't crow so loud," cautioned Ben with a good-natured laugh. "We'll believe you—now. Let's find out some more when she comes back after the plates."

"Let's ask her when Egbert started this out-of-door business," said Francie. "That'll show whether the G. S. C. gave him the first push or if he just started it for himself."

There was a chorus of disapproval. "How could he start for himself when he didn't like a single thing except books?" demanded Beth Anne. "Of course we started him."

Every one agreed to this, and Mrs. Horn's return was eagerly awaited to unravel further the mystery of Egbert's preferences. But, although they delayed a very long time over their plates and questioned Sophie when she

appeared in place of her employer, they got no more information in regard to Egbert or any other of the occupants of Stepping Stones.

"'Deed I don't know nothin' about 'em," was all Sophie would say, as she stolidly cleared the tables.

So they were forced to go without any further details, and with their thirst for those details growing stronger with every turn of the discussion.

"There's one thing we do know, though," said Beth Anne, as they went down the uneven old stone steps to the road. "And that is that Egbert and Geraldine are going to be Really-for-trulys some day. Any one can see that now."

"And it's the good old G. S. C. that's helped boost them along," boasted Ben. "I'll bet anything that the book party hooked them. That was a great idea of yours, Beth Anne."

Beth Anne beamed at Ben's liberal speech. "You thought of asking them to the Gym meeting, you know," she laughed. "And

Jinny did, too, and Bess and Francie all helped. I guess we're all in it,—Claire and all. Won't it be jolly, though, if they get to be nice and foolish like us, so we can have real good times at the Gym meetings ——"

"Hold on, miss, you're ahead of your schedule," said Ben with a grin. "Hadn't you better wait till you're real sure? They may be just fooling us, and not a bit changed after all. We don't want to make any mistake, you know."

Beth Anne sighed over this suggestion. "I'm awfully tired of those Niminy-Piminies," she said plaintively. "I do wish ——"

Jinny nudged her. "Captain Dan'l is calling," she said. "See, there he is in the front garden."

"I'm teachin' that blamed parrot of Miss Carrie's a new speech," called Captain Dan'l, as they halted for a moment at the gate. "I got it from the woosterd motto in the sittin'-room," and he chuckled deeply. "'God Bless Our Home,'—that's what it is. Polly's taken

to it like sin," and he chuckled again till his whole body shook.

"I think it's perfectly lovely," cried Beth Anne with great enthusiasm.

"And it fits in so splendidly, too!" exclaimed Bess. "May we come and hear her say it some time soon?"

"Any day you please!" said the captain heartily. "The sooner the better, and the oftener the welcomer."

They were moving off, much gratified with this cordiality, when Ben called back, "Better try her with the other motto!" and then whispered, "Race you all to the corner," and was off in a flash.

"What did you mean by that?" demanded Francie, as they dropped to a walk when the race was ended. "What motto are you talking about, anyway?"

Ben snickered. "The one in the parlor——" he began.

Beth Anne broke in on him with quick reproach. "Why, Ben Williams, that was

real impudent!" she cried. "That one says, 'Love the Giver,' and ——"

"Well, he liked it all right," interposed Ben, undaunted by her rebuke. "He laughed all over his face. Guess I know what a man'd like better than you, Miss Snippy."

Jinny flung an arm about Beth Anne just as she was about to retort, and said gaily: "Making up with Miss Carrie certainly has made a difference in Cap'n Dan'l, hasn't it? Talk about loving your enemies,—he's going at it hammer and tongs."

The following days, however, seemed rather flat and dull, without the exhilarating task of reclaiming the Niminy-Piminies. Beth Anne had not realized how great a part all three Van Meters had come to play in her life until they were gone. Even the delightful duty of teaching Polly Phemie some mild new speeches did not take away the lonely feeling, and although her weekly letter to her mother grew to voluminous size, and she practiced over-time, and kept the red diary writ-

ten up to the minute, she still had time to lament their desertion and count the days till their return.

Nothing more had been learned concerning Egbert's secret exploits. Captain Dan'l when questioned evaded all queries so skilfully that the interrogators gave up in disgust.

"I believe he knows something," said Francie, as they were discussing the rather threadbare subject in a corner of the garden. "He looks too innocent. I bet he knows everything."

"Has Claire written yet?" asked Bess.

Beth Anne produced a rather blurred post-card with a picture of a willow-bordered brook on one side and on the other the words, "Home next Wensday. This is like the Ripple. Claire."

Bess examined the scrawl and handed it on to the boys. "She spells Wednesday just like you, Beth Anne," she said critically. "She's a scrawly writer, too. I don't believe Geraldine scribbles like that."

"She hasn't told you very much about them," commented Francie.

Beth Anne felt an instant regret that she had told them of Claire's promise to write all that she found out concerning her brother and sister in their weeks in town.

"I don't believe she knows a single thing, or she'd write it," she declared loyally. "Just you wait and see before you say things, Francie Drake. Claire always sticks to her word every time."

Francie grunted amiably. "I wasn't saying anything, was I?" he asked pacifically. "Of course, Claire's a good one. But I'll be mighty well pleased to hear what she has to say about it when she does come," he added thoughtfully.

CHAPTER XX

THE PASSING OF THE NIMINY-PIMINIES

"WHAT do you think's happened?" cried Beth Anne. "You'll never, never guess!"

Her face was pink with excitement, and in her flurry she ran into George with his tray of oatmeal dishes, almost upsetting herself and completely knocking the breath from her eager lips.

Jinny paused with her orange spoon halfway to her lips, and Mary Stone laid down her fruit knife.

"You'd better tell us then," laughed Mary, motioning Beth Anne to her place at the table. "We can't postpone breakfast a single moment longer. We've waited half an hour as it is, so out with it, miss, and make a clean breast of it, too. What have you been up to now?"

Beth Anne bubbled with importance. "You'll never guess," she repeated with her words tumbling over each other in her eagerness. "I'll start right in at the beginning, shall I?"

Mary nodded and Jinny cried, "Oh, do get on, Beth Anne. I'm simply dying to hear."

Then Beth Anne subsided into comparative calm, though her eyes danced and her breath came fast. "You know how we all thought Egbert stiff and silly, and Geraldine sort of weak and limp?" she began. "We thought we ought to try to make them see what fun it was to be just plain out-of-door, really-for-truly people, Mary dear," she explained to the interested Mary. "And we tried awfully hard to make them all like our sort of fun. Why, we had the book party and we talked and talked miles about running and swimming and playing games, and we thought Claire was perfectly fine, because she saw our way and came into our games and things.

You know how different she is since she's been coming for the talking lessons. She's learned to like fun, you see."

"Well, tell us your great news, Beth Anne. It's waited too long."

"I wondered why the Van Meters didn't come home yesterday, as Claire wrote," she began. "So I got up early and went for a little walk, just to see if the house were still closed. And when I saw the shutters were all open and the bedroom window-curtains drawn, I felt sort of bad to think that Claire should come home and never let us know. So I turned right around to come back, but the Ripple looked so lovely that I went just a teeny, weeny way down the banks and there, by the pool, was Egbert! He was all muddy, and he had his shoes and stockings off!"

The expression on their faces fully satisfied her. "He jumped like anything when I called to him, but he wasn't a bit snippy. He let me come down and see the traps he was making ——"

"Traps!" cried Jinny. "Egbert with traps?"

"Yes, indeed," triumphed Beth Anne, her head beginning to wag. "He has a collection of water-bugs and animals, and he's going to let me help. He says he's found out for himself how nice it is to prowl around outdoors and play, and he's given up being a mummy, that's what he said,—just like that," she ended emphatically, for the expression in Jinny's eyes was a tiny bit confusing to her. She went on very seriously, with a shy glance at Mary: "And he says the reason he decided it was worth while to try to like our sort of fun was that we were so jolly and chummy with one another, and got such a lot of fun out of nothing. Their friends always had to have so much to make them enjoy themselves,—big prizes and fancy parties and dressed-up expensive clothes, you know."

"And how does Geraldine feel about it?" asked Mary.

"Oh, she'll follow whatever he does, but

she isn't awfully worked up over it," replied Beth Anne easily. "She's not that sort, you know. But he says she'll like tennis or golf and those quiet games where she can wear nice clothes. And that's something. We can't expect too much. It's come out wonderfully, and I'm perfectly crazy to hear what the boys will say. Let's go tell them the minute we've finished, Jinny-pinny dearest."

Jinny was just as eager as Beth Anne, and they dispatched the rest of their breakfast and were jumping up to leave when Mary halted them. She had a square envelope in her hand which had just been brought in with the other mail, and she was smiling broadly.

"There is more news to tell the boys," she announced, holding up the sheet. "There will be a wedding in Centerville before the end of the month, and who do you think it is?"

They guessed all the probable brides among the young girls of the village but Mary shook her head.

"Miss Carrie and Captain Dan'l!" she pro-

claimed gaily. "They are to be married on the twentieth at Angeline's, and they are inviting all of the members of the G. S. C., —a secret organization whose fame has somehow reached their ears."

Beth Anne gurgled and Jinny gasped. "Oh, oh, oh!" they cried in a chorus of utter astonishment.

"Now run along and spread the news," said Mary, rising and gathering up her mail. "Don't forget that the school bell will ring as usual at nine o'clock."

Beth Anne paused on the threshold. "Are Egbert and Geraldine asked too?" she inquired. "We'll have to get them right into the club, if they aren't, for I know Miss Carrie and Captain Dan'l will want them. It wouldn't seem natural without them, now."

Jinny gave a quick assent. "For they aren't Niminy-Piminies any longer," she cried joyfully. "They're all really-for-truly people at last!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE PICNIC AT DARK HOLLOW

THE next morning was without a cloud to mar its sunny loveliness and the picnic party gathered at Gable End in the best of spirits.

Mary took Claire and Beth Anne and Egbert in the buckboard, while Mrs. Drake had Bess and Jinny and Geraldine with her in her phaeton, Ben having elected to drive with George, who was bringing the baskets in the old trap.

The clock was striking ten as Ben shouted out from his position in the rear of the procession, "All aboard! Express to Dark Hollow and Pebble Creek!" and they were off.

Laughing and chattering they jogged through the golden morning, past white farmhouses with their green and blossoming orchards, into blue-shadowed hollows and by fertile uplands where the ploughmen were

breaking the fields into brown ridges, till the red-shale road turned into a gravelly road, and, twisting a sharp corner, plunged down a sandy incline to a shadowy mass of fragrant pines.

As they dropped from break to break on the steep descent, the shimmer of silver water flashed from beyond the dark tree trunks of the pine grove and Beth Anne nudged Claire and poked Egbert unceremoniously in the back.

"There's Dark Hollow," she said eagerly pointing ahead. "Isn't it perfectly lovely?"

"It's beautiful!" cried Claire. "There's the bridge and the dam, and the big stepping-stones, all just as you said. Oh, what clear, clear water!"

Egbert, who had rather surprised them by appearing in a flannel shirt and corduroy trousers, nodded approval. "It looks like good fishing," he said.

Beth Anne almost fell off the seat at such affability. She nudged Claire again, and

then her love for the spot dwarfed all other feelings.

"Wait till we get to the camping place," she boasted. "It's twice as pretty as this inside."

Egbert sprang down quite like a normal boy, and with a good deal of pulling and panting managed to throw down the bars. They drove in on the grassy uneven road, going carefully through the marshy hollow, and coming up safe on the rutted track that ran along the creek edge.

"Oh, it's lovely," said Claire, looking along the shady vista ahead. "It's prettier even than the wading pool."

They stopped at the level near the ford where the lumber teams used to cross, and jumped down.

The baskets and rugs were carried to the wide level beneath the big white oak and every one was soon hard at work.

Mary was superintending the digging of the oven for the vegetables, while Mrs. Drake was

prospecting for a suitable place for the cloth to be laid. Bess and Claire and Ben were collecting light wood for the fires, while Francie was selecting flat stones from the edge of the creek to build the stove. Jinny had gone off to find the sketching place Mr. Burton had told her of last fall, taking Geraldine with her.

Egbert watched the spade cut out the clean circle for the oven and saw George lay the corn and sweet potatoes in the shallow pit, and, after shoveling the earth back on them, build a huge fire on top.

"Will they really cook down underneath?" he asked in surprise.

Beth Anne nodded. "They're always just right, too," she said. "You wait and see! Now they're going to build the stove. Mary's finding where the wind is."

Mary moistened her finger and held it up, saying to George, "It blows from the creek. We'll make the opening on this side."

Egbert was deeply interested, and Beth

Anne was delighted to instruct him. "You've got to put the open side of the stove to the wind," she explained. "The fire won't burn if you don't have a good draught."

Egbert's face grew more alert every moment as he watched them pile the stones in an even circle, leaving a wide hole at the bottom and another smaller crevice at the back of the top layer of smooth flat stones which capped the structure.

"It's really wonderful," he said, when the fire was started and, thanks to the brisk breeze from the creek, roared merrily.

"Now for water for the coffee," said Mary, holding up the smoke-blackened pot that had served them in other seasons.

Egbert sprang forward. "Let me get it," he said. "I'll be extremely careful."

"I'm sure of that," smiled Mary as she handed it to him, and he actually ran off down the slope to the creek so fast that Beth Anne had to put out an effort to keep up with him.

"Phew, but you're getting fast," she said as he stooped to scoop the water from a deep spot. "You must have been practicing. When you first came you couldn't run a bit."

Egbert nodded gravely, and they carried the brimming pot back to the fire in silence.

Jinny had come back with her hands full of feathery blossoms, and with Bess and Claire was helping Mrs. Drake arrange the cloth in a pleasant shady spot under the white oak. Geraldine was putting Jinny's blooms into a graceful bunch in the center of the cloth, while Ben and Francie hovered about everywhere giving unasked advice and indulging in practical jokes on the girls, when Mary's eye was not on them.

It took a long time for the vegetables to bake in their underground oven and the fire in the stove had died to a bed of glowing embers with the coffee-pot bubbling upon it before Mrs. Drake announced that the corn and potatoes were done, and that it was time for the ham to be broiled.

"Aren't you fearfully hungry?" said Bess, as the odors began to waft from the thin pink wafers sputtering in the pan under Mary's skilful manipulation.

"I can almost hear my ribs rattle when I jump," giggled Beth Anne, hopping perilously near the icy nest where the cream and butter reposed.

"I'll have to begin on the grass pretty soon," groaned Ben in a famished tone, when a cry from Mary startled them.

"My hat! My hat!" she wailed, pointing the fork to the spot where the baskets stood.

A big white cow was nosing the hat Mary had left on the grass, and was evidently making up her mind to test the quality of the straw with her teeth.

"It's my new French sailor. Oh, stop her! Stop her!" she cried again.

Ben and Francie hesitated for one short instant,—not because they feared the cow but because they had failed to take in the situation, and in that short instant Egbert had sprung

to his feet and was racing to the rescue before the leisurely cow could do more than mouth the brim of the cherished sailor.

He flew over the ground like an arrow and with such speed that he ran straight into the cow, frightening the wits almost out of her and upsetting himself at the same time.

"Oh, Egbert, you've killed yourself!" cried Beth Anne tragically as he disappeared down the slope on his knees, while the cow, with tail in air and heels flying, tore off in the opposite direction.

"He's gone!" said Claire in an intense voice, but Egbert's dark head appeared over the bank before they could move.

"I've got it," he cried, waving the rescued hat, as he scrambled up the bank, while the cow could be heard crashing off through the bushes and running wildly to the herd in the field beyond.

Beth Anne rushed up to him as he handed the hat to Mary with his grave polite bow. "Did you hurt yourself?" she asked solicit-

ously. "That old cow must have been pretty bumpy to fall against."

Egbert laughed out loud at this, and Mary said kindly, "I'm ever so glad to have my hat. It isn't hurt a bit, barring a bit of dust that will brush off."

"She'd just turned it over to read the name inside," returned Egbert, with another laugh. "She must have been trying to pronounce it when I came up."

"She'd be cleverer than I if she could," replied Mary gaily. "It took me ages to learn how."

Here Mrs. Drake called them all to dinner and Beth Anne hurried after Egbert to the spot behind the scrubby juniper trees where the cloth was spread. There was a great deal of gay confusion in selecting places but they were soon settled and the meal began.

They made a pretty picture, all of them, seated there on the mossy grass with the sun flickering on the white cloth, and the delicate colors of the flowers set off by the golden

butter-balls and vivid red tomatoes on their glossy leaf-platters. The creek murmured behind them and the birds sang above them and the breeze, fluting the water and stirring the branches above them, was cool in their faces, and the meal was as merry as any one could wish.

But picnic dinners, no matter how good they are, cannot last forever, and so it was not very long before Jinny was getting out her canvas and paint-box, while Francie and Egbert were unpacking the fishing tackle, preparatory to an expedition down the creek in search of bass.

Ben had offered to lend Egbert his line while he took Egbert's place as burden-bearer for the painting outfit, as he knew the way across the stepping-stones to the rock where Mr. Burton always stood his easel when he painted Pebble Creek.

"There's a dandy view up and down the creek," he told Jinny, as she and Beth Anne took up the folding easel and stool which had

been two of Jinny's rewards for good work under Mr. Burton's tuition.

"Yes, Father always puts his easel on the biggest rock over there," said Beth Anne nodding at the wide boulder half-way out in the stream. "It's the only place he can get near the deeper water to paint the reflections, you know."

"Go on, Ben, and we'll follow right after," said Jinny tucking her painting-apron under her arm. "Phew-w, but the water's high today. We'll have to wade, shan't we?"

"Sure thing, if you girls aren't afraid," said Ben, who was slipping off his shoes hastily. "We can get over easily then."

Beth Anne sniffed at the idea that they could be daunted by the shallow lapping water that covered some of the big stepping-stones.

"Fraid cat yourself, if you call that anything to be scared of," she retorted, dropping her burden and peeling off her shoes and stockings rapidly.

They had their shoes and stockings off in a jiffy, and started across the submerged stepping-stones, Ben going first, as before.

"Jiminy, it's cold!" he said, as he put his bare feet into the swift water, but at the mocking laughter of the girls he plunged in to his knees.

"It's warmer out here," he added, and then stepping up on the big stones, he went on, calling back: "Come on right after me."

Jinny plunged in, floundering at first, for the stones, though warm and dry above the swirl of the water, were glassy with green, slippery growth, and the current pulled hard at her ankles.

"Whe-e-e," squealed Beth Anne, stepping warily into the first shallow. "My feet won't stay put! I wish I had an air-ship. Wait for me, Jinny."

Jinny, with her floppy hat low over her eyes and her hands too full to straighten it, gurgled with laughter as she paused on her boulder.

"I'm following 'sight unseen,'" she said, as Beth Anne came closer. "I hope Ben knows the way, for all I can see now is his bare feet on the stones."

Beth Anne had no encumbering hat, so she saw Ben leap the last small pool and land safely on the shelving edge of Mr. Burton's boulder and turn to raise a warning hand to Jinny, waving her to the other side of the rock. She saw Jinny, following blindly and not heeding the signal, make the jump and reach the wet edge of the tiny pool just where the water lapped the smooth green stone; she saw her slide to her knees, holding her canvas high and dry, and then, not stopping to remember that the tiny pool was too shallow for danger, she gave a cry of horror.

"Oh, Jinny, Jinny!" she screamed, and with that despairing cry she lost her own balance on her rock in mid-stream and down she went into the swift current.

She had one glimpse of the far-away blue sky through the splash of the spray. Then

her head struck against one of the big boulders, —a light touch in passing, as it seemed to her, and then the whole world drifted into a blank.

CHAPTER XXII

EGBERT TO THE RESCUE

When Beth Anne and Jinny splashed into the water at the stepping-stones the rest of the party, who saw the accident, laughed hilariously, not realizing there could be any danger.

Jinny, with her skirts dripping, was on her feet in a twinkling and joined in the mirth, though she did not know that Beth Anne, too, had met with an accident.

Ben was the first to understand the danger, for he saw Beth Anne swept down the current, and something in her first struggling clutch at the rocks as she was whirled on told him that she was helpless in the rush of the main channel stream. He gave a loud cry, his face going white under its tan.

"Wait," he called frantically. "Wait, I'm coming! Swim doggie, Beth Anne, swim dog-

gie," and he dashed through the shallows, making for the spot nearest, tearing wildly at his collar as he ran.

Beth Anne was beyond any sort of swimming by that time, and was being hurried on by the swift stream into the deeper water by the dam.

The others caught Ben's alarm, and although Mary and Mrs. Drake sped to the creek's edge they caught only a glimpse of her as she passed,—a mere flash of a bare arm and blue linen through the ripple of the current, and then only empty water, as she went down for the second time.

Ben, swimming now with all his strength, was far behind and powerless to save her, and Mary, with her heart stopping at the thought, knew that if help did not come swiftly Beth Anne's bright curls would never toss gaily in the sun again nor her dancing feet frisk over the green meadows by the willow-bordered Ripple.

"Oh, Beth Anne, Beth Anne, why did I let

you go!" she sobbed under her breath, and though she knew she could do nothing, she set her teeth and ran more swiftly, with Mrs. Drake and Geraldine sobbing behind her and Jinny on the opposite shore stumbling over the rough pebbles in a vain effort to reach Beth Anne.

Suddenly Jinny stood still pointing and crying: "Look! Oh, look!"

And Mary, never slackening her swift pace, saw down below where the stream narrowed again a figure start out from the trees that bordered the creek.

"George!" she sobbed in relief. "Oh, God bless him and help him!"

He dashed out over the uneven rock-strewn bed of the creek, pulling off his coat as he ran, and Mary's heart leaped within her at the sight, for she saw that he would reach the stream before Beth Anne could pass and she was beginning to have a faint hope when she saw him stumble and fall, losing precious time by the delay.

"He'll never make it," she breathed through her set teeth, and then her eyes, which had been intent on him, caught another figure which she had not noticed,—a figure which was outdistancing the heavier one and gaining on the hurrying current.

"Egbert!" panted Jinny, from across the whirl of water, and Ben, who was sweeping onward, lifted his head at the cry, shouting fresh encouragement to Beth Anne's deaf ears.

The slender figure tore madly over the litter of stones till he reached the big boulders that lined the channel. Without a moment's pause he plunged in, diving into the depths of the broad smooth water, and they watched him with tortured hearts, knowing that Beth Anne's life depended on his success. George, a few rods behind, stopped on the brink, too, waiting for the moment when he should be of service.

A moment, or an eternity, went by and then a few rods further down they saw a white face with dripping dark hair rise to

the surface and George plunged in with a ringing cry: "He got her. He's done got her!"

It was another eternity before they saw George emerge with a limp, blue bundle in his arms, followed by a streaming, staggering figure of a boy.

Straight toward the stricken group on the shore he came, stumbling over the rough shallows and up the broken shore, with Beth Anne's drooping golden head hanging limply over his arm and her pale face showing very white beside his dark one.

Very tenderly he laid her down on the smooth green slope where they had all been so merry such a little while ago, and Mary heard him draw a long, sobbing breath as he put back one bright curl that had washed across the closed eyes.

"Oh, George!" was all that Mary could say, but there was a world of gratitude in the tone. She was so passionately intent on the fact that Beth Anne had been brought

back to her that she did not even remember Egbert's part in it.

She dropped on her knees beside the quiet figure, and taking it all dripping as it was into her arms, she tried to find some sign of life,—to rouse some responsive spark.

"Beth Anne! Beth Anne!" she called sharply, shaking her a little in her frantic fear.

But Beth Anne lay limp and still, and there was no sound save the excited sobbing and the splash of running feet as Ben and Jinny came panting out of the shallows.

Then they started in earnest, rolling her over a big log which George and the boys hastily brought from the near-by oak grove, and after an anxious minute or two, while they all crowded about trying to discover some sign of returning life, Beth Anne began to breathe.

"She's coming back," whispered Mary, while through the murmur that relieved the strong tension Ben's thankful heart welled out in a single word, "Gosh!"

Suddenly Beth Anne stirred, opened her eyes and struggled into a sitting position, looking about her at their white, tearful faces in a daze of wonder.

"Why, what's the matter? What's happened?" she asked with a rather wobbly little laugh. "You all look awfully funny."

There was a perfect chorus of explanation, and Beth Anne enjoyed herself hugely for the next few minutes, in spite of the giddy feeling that made her content to stay quietly in Mary's arms.

She had been unconscious all the time she had been in the water and had so escaped the agony the others had suffered, so she had now only an exhilarating sense of being a very much beloved and important person. It was very pleasant to be the center of these eager questions and excited comment and she enjoyed it to the full. She described her own feelings as she fell off the rock very minutely indeed, and at the end she suddenly realized what an effort must have been put forth to

drag her from the clutch of the whirling current. Turning swiftly she embarrassed Egbert horribly by flinging her wet arms about his neck and giving him a grateful hug.

"You've saved my life, Egbert," she cried warmly. "You've been a real hero. They've all been regular heroes! Haven't they, Mary? I should think Egbert and George and Ben, too, ought to get medals and things; don't you think they might, Mrs. Drake?"

Mrs. Drake laughed and then said briskly, "We'll attend to that later though, young lady. Our first business is to get you dried out. You're dripping like a small fountain, and that's the way small persons get colds in their small noses."

She and Mary took Beth Anne and Jinny, whose skirts were soaking, off to the friendly shelter of the junipers, where they soon made them as dry and comfortable as though no accidents had happened.

Beth Anne, tastefully attired in a rug and

a long coat of Mrs. Drake's, was cuddled down in the sunshine in a nest of carriage cushions, while Jinny, with a plaid rug pinned tightly about her in place of her wet skirts, was allowed to go under George's pilotage across the stepping-stones to the flat rock to make the interrupted sketch.

Beth Anne, from her comfortable nest, giggled at the picture Jinny made out there on the sunny rock with her body swathed in the gay plaids, her bare toes shining through the fringe and her tumbled dark hair blowing in the breeze.

"You look like a regular old squaw, Jinny-pinny," she called mockingly.

Jinny looked up from the palette whereon she was squeezing some color from the tubes, and waved her paint-brushes.

"Wait till I get the paint on!" she laughed back. "I'll be a real brave on the war-path!"

Beth Anne cuddled down against Mary to listen to Mrs. Drake's reading, while Geraldine and Claire busied themselves with

drying her curly locks. Mary's shoulder was very comfortable and Beth Anne was really very tired from her "drowning" as she proudly called it, and, with the murmur of the pleasantly flowing words weaving a sleepy spell about her in the sunshine, she slipped off to a dreamless sleep, and never stirred till long after the tale had ended and the rest of the party were gathering the baskets and other goods together for the homeward trip.

Jinny had just come back across the stepping-stones and was carrying her finished sketch very carefully. As Beth Anne sat up she shyly held it out for them all to see.

"Why, you can paint almost as well as Father!" cried Beth Anne with liberal praise. "It looks just like the creek."

Egbert examined it carefully. He evidently understood such things better than the other boys. "The water doesn't look very wet," he said with an anxious frown.

Beth Anne thought Jinny would hate him

for this criticism, but she answered eagerly as to a real comrade. "I know it," she said, cocking her head on one side. "I did try, but it just wouldn't look wet," and Beth Anne's opinion of Egbert rose still higher.

"Bet you got soaked when you were in it, all righty," laughed Ben, and Francie patted Jinny encouragingly, saying in his most patronizing tone:

"You'll learn how some day. Can't hope for too much, you know. You're young yet."

While the horses were being harnessed and put in the carriages, Beth Anne and Jinny donned their dried and shriveled garments, and as the long afternoon shadows stretched down across the rippling creek, they made their homeward start.

Beth Anne stood up in the buckboard for a last glimpse of the "drowning place," and then she snuggled down beside Mary's warm arm.

"I'm pretty glad I'm here instead of there!"

she whispered, and Mary's arm circled her as though she felt just as Beth Anne did.

Egbert flung down the bars, and the little procession filed out, leaving Dark Hollow to the birds and fishes and shadowy wind-noises that were murmuring in the oaks and junipers.

Beth Anne wrote with enjoyment that night: "I got drowned and Egbert and George rescued me. He has been swimming with C. Dan'l in the Rippel pool and in town every day at school. Geraldine likes the country best now. Miss Simpkins liked us girls the day of the party and told Mr. Van Meter about us. So they're to have a swimming-pool and gymnasium in the meadow, and are going to be Really-for-trulys after all. The G. S. C. has just made them over. G. & E. are to be initiated and come in to the club to-morrow. The wedding party is going to be great fun with all of us there. I guess Miss Carrie won't mind having such a lot of us. It is in a good cause, and brides ought to be kind and helpful to mankind."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WEDDING PARTY

"WHAT was that? Has the carriage come for us already?"

Beth Anne was having the last touches put to the bows on her wedding frock, and she started as Mary patted the blue ribbons into place, thinking she heard sounds of wheels on the drive.

"I didn't hear anything," replied Jinny, who was sitting sedately on a stool fearful of mussing her airy gown.

Mary laughed lightly as she pushed Beth Anne away for a final critical inspection. "Your ears are too sharp, missy," she said. "Some day you'll hear things that aren't really happening. George will bring the cut-under promptly at four, and it's only three forty-five by my very reliable wrist-watch.

There, you're finished to perfection now, and I must jump into my own things."

Beth Anne surveyed herself in the long mirror with great satisfaction. The bows on her curly head and delicate white muslin were just of the right shade of blue, and she thoroughly approved of the way Mary had tied the sash ribbon.

"I look like a regular bridesmaid, don't I?" she gurgled. "And so do you, Jinny-pinny dearest. You're the loveliest thing I ever saw in that fluffity dress. I guess Miss Carrie will be glad Mary wrote to Mother for new frocks,—it's so nice to have 'specially' dresses for one's parties,—particularly wedding parties."

Jinny agreed heartily. "But I wish we didn't have to go alone," she said with sudden shyness. "I don't know how to act at weddings, and I'm afraid I'll do something wrong."

"Pooh, you just watch me," said Beth Anne with airy confidence. "I've been to

two weddings, and I know just how to do it. Mary had to fix us up, and that made her late with her own dressing. She'll be along right after us, anyway. There, I'm sure that's George. I hear Major stamping. Come on, pokey, we haven't a minute to waste."

They flew off, calling a hasty good-bye to Mary, and did not notice that the doors of the opposite rooms were all closed, nor that Mary's response came from another room than her own.

Miss Carrie's house looked very festive with the windows all open to the sweet spring air and the porch and front yard filled with chatting groups of neighbors and relatives who had overflowed from the house to discuss their own private concerns until the moment should come when the sounds of the wedding march played on the parlor organ by Miss Carrie's city cousin should call them all to the parlor.

At the sight of the groups of sober-looking

men Beth Anne's confidence slipped from her.

"I don't believe there are any women at all," she whispered uncomfortably to Jinny. "I guess we'll have to wait out here till some girls or women come."

Jinny's bright eyes had been occupied to some purpose and her fit of shyness had passed. "There are a lot of them indoors," she said. "I see Claire and Geraldine, and there's Egbert, too, going into the parlor. We can catch them if we hurry."

They joined the trio just inside the parlor door, but Beth Anne was so overcome by the wonderful transformation that had been wrought in Miss Carrie's plain stiff parlor that she could only squeeze Claire's hand and whisper, "Isn't it gorgeoliferous! I didn't dream it could look like this!"

The room was a veritable bower of spring bloom,—flowers and vines hid the dull wall-paper and harsh outlines of mantel-shelf and doorway, and the alcove between the fireplace

and the organ had been made into a lovely flowery arbor plainly intended for the bridal couple. It was all so simple and so unpretending that even the most critical taste could have found no fault with it, and to the eager young eyes it seemed the most perfect setting for the great event.

"I guess she must have done it," whispered Beth Anne, nodding at the city cousin, who sat calmly at the organ looking as if unconscious of the many eyes that were fixed upon her.

"Ss-sh!" cautioned Egbert, as there was a rustle on the stair with the sound of feet coming slowly down.

The city cousin glanced over her shoulder, and then with a nod she began to play the Wedding March from Lohengrin, and the outsiders gathered in the hallway.

Beth Anne had one of the sensations of her life as the bridal party entered the room. Mr. Lathrop led the procession, and then came Miss Carrie on the arm of portly old Mr.

Brown, a distant relative of hers, and, wonder of wonders, she was dressed like a real bridy bride! She had a veil, too, that hung down to the hem of her shimmering gown, and she carried a bouquet of white roses, and she looked so pretty that Beth Anne gasped with surprise.

"She's as splendiferous as the parlor," she whispered to Jinny. "I guess Cap'n Dan'l won't know her."

But Cap'n Dan'l, who had been waiting beside the alcove with his hand resting on the covered table or box by the wall, seemed quite able to recognize the future Mrs. Snow in spite of her radiant garments. He stepped forward as she advanced, and as the ceremony went on his loud responses proved that he was perfectly satisfied with her in any disguise she might care to assume.

Beth Anne held her breath lest she should miss one word of that short, simple service. It was her first home wedding, and she was very near the bridal couple and could note every motion; so when Cap'n Dan'l in kneel-

ing for the benediction caught his sleeve button in the covering of the table by the wall, Beth Anne saw the cover slip from the big familiar cage, and was not so startled and scandalized as were the other guests when Polly Phemie's harsh voice rang out clearly in the stillness.

"I'm a lady! I'm a lady!" she screamed. "Please excuse me. I'm a bad old bird. Ha, ha, ha!"

In the horrified silence that filled the room, her voice took on twice its usual volume, and her chuckle sounded fairly diabolical.

"God bless our home!" she shrieked. "Love your enemies! Cut it out! Scat! Oh, *gosh!*"

Ben, who was back by one of the windows, quietly dropped out on the porch at this last volley and Beth Anne stuffed her handkerchief in her mouth to save an explosion, but Captain Dan'l, who had risen and was facing the company with a broad smile on his ruddy face, was quite unruffled by Polly's outburst.

Flinging the cover back on the cage with one hand while he held his wife's hand in the other arm, he said heartily, looking about to include every one in sight:

"I guess we can all forgive Polly Phemie for sayin' her piece in the wrong place, for most of you have heard how she made up the fuss between Miss Carrie,—that is, Mrs. Snow, —and me by that same active tongue of hers. She sure was entitled to some part in this service, and we can't blame her if she lost her place and spoke too soon."

There was a little flutter of applause at this and Beth Anne's bright head began to waggle in the proud knowledge that Polly's speech of reconciliation had been taught her by the Grow Straight Club. She flashed a look about the room in search of faces that might show an answering light, and she gave a great start of surprise.

There in the far corner by the door stood her father and mother!

She never knew how she got over to them

through the crowd. She only knew that her mother's kisses were sweeter than anything else in the world and that her father's strong arms made the happy hour still more rapturous for her.

"How did you do it?" she asked over and over again while Jinny made her way to them with her most radiant face. "I never dreamed you were coming home so soon."

Mrs. Burton laughed her pretty rippling laugh. "Didn't you hear wheels while you were dressing, chick?" she asked, pinching Beth Anne's pink cheek lovingly. "We simply sneaked in and hid till you were gone and then we got into our Sunday clothes pell-mell and followed you, like the villains in the play."

Beth Anne looked with pride at her mother and father. Mrs. Burton was so slender and girlish looking in her lovely filmy dress with the wide lace hat shadowing her bright hair and tender eyes, and Mr. Burton was so tall and strong and handsome with his well-shaped

head and broad shoulders that Beth Anne felt positive no one ever had more adorable parents.

Catching sight of Claire's hair ribbon among the crowd at the other side of the room, she beckoned wildly.

"Come on over," she cried loudly, forgetting everything but her pride in her beloved mother and father. "They've come back, and they're splendider than ever!"

Above the ripple of laughter that greeted this enthusiastic announcement Polly Phemie's voice rose shrill and penetrating. "She's a pippin!" screamed that wonderful bird. "She's a peach! Oh, my! Please excuse me. I'm a bad old bird."

The three Van Meters gazed with respectful admiration at the very satisfactory parents which Beth Anne had so characteristically introduced to public notice, but Beth Anne bubbled with excited delight and insisted on their being kissed each in turn by her mother and shaken hands with by her father.

"Now you see how lovely they are," she crowed triumphantly, and was going on with a list of their perfections, when her mother laughingly interposed.

"Mercy, Beth Anne, we're not wax-works!" she cried. "Do let them find out our weaknesses for themselves. Tell me what you've been doing the last few days. Your last letter must have missed me."

So with Jinny on one arm and Geraldine and Claire as close to her as they could possibly squeeze, she listened to their account of the "drowning" and the rescue and all that had happened since. She put a grateful hand on Egbert's arm when the story of his part in the rescue was babbled out hastily by the excited girls, but she said nothing to embarrass him just then, and Egbert, who had dreaded being so publicly thanked, gave her an adoring look from his dark eyes.

"She's very beautiful, I think, and very different from other ladies," he said to Beth Anne after they had shaken hands with the

bride and were waiting for the grown-ups to lead the way to the dining-room.

Beth Anne pranced, shaking her curls with a gay little toss. "Of course she's beautiful," she said lovingly. "She's bound to be lovely. She's just Mother!"

The wedding supper was the jolliest feast that Beth Anne had ever known and that was saying a good deal, when one remembers how many jolly times she had known in her short life. There was an exciting element in this gaiety, however, that thrilled Beth Anne every time she looked at Miss Carrie in her shining satin and at Cap'n Dan'l in his glossy black.

"Just think, Jinny-pinny, we really-for-truly helped them make up," she whispered. "Isn't it all awfully exciting!"

Jinny nodded with her mouth full of delicious confections, and when she could speak, she whispered back, "Yes, it's perfectly splendid. We've a lot to be glad about. Egbert and Geraldine and Claire being in the

club, and the swimming-pool and the new gymnasium at Stepping Stones are going to be just fine. We're awfully happy, aren't we, Beth Anne?"

Beth Anne nodded with her eyes on the gay company where her beloved mother and father sat beside the bride and groom. "I tell you it pays to be good," she confessed with a giggle at her own wisdom. "We're having lots better times than if we'd been selfish pigs and hated the Van Meters and kept to ourselves. I guess the old Grow Straight Club will be a lot more fun now. We'll have better times than ever."

Bess broke in on their wisdom: "She's going to change her dress, and whoever gets the bouquet when she flings it will be the next bride. Come on, see who gets it. Claire and Geraldine are over there by the door all ready for us."

The bride rose as Bess spoke and there was a laughing scramble for places in the hall as she went up the narrow stairway. Beth Anne

was jostled against Angeline and as Mrs. Snow leaned out and flung the flowers with a rather uncertain aim, the bunch came plumping down right between their shoulders and lodged securely.

There was a shout of mirth at this, for no one could see whether the bridal bouquet belonged to Angeline or Beth Anne.

Angeline gave her pleased chuckle and made a little movement as though to let the flowers fall in her small friend's arm, but Beth Anne was quick.

With a swift withdrawal of her shoulder she let the bouquet drop into Angeline's hands, crying at the top of her voice so that Angeline might hear clearly:

"Others First! Others First!"

And Polly Phemie from her corner clamored suddenly: "God bless our home! Love your enemies! Excuse me, I'm a bad old bird! Hurrah for liberty!"

Amid the laughter and applause that greeted this outburst Beth Anne slipped over to her

mother. "Isn't it lovely?" she whispered. "We're having such fun! Everybody's so nice and chummy now. I never had such a good time."

Mrs. Burton held her close as she whispered in return, "It's just as I said, chick; the loving-kindness makes it all worth while."

Beth Anne sighed happily as she nestled against the filmy dress.

"Yes, that's it," she said. "And I want to go on being lovinger and kinder all the time. It's such fun!"

The Stories in this Series are:

BETH ANNE HERSELF
BETH ANNE, REALLY-FOR-TRULY
BETH ANNE'S NEW COUSIN